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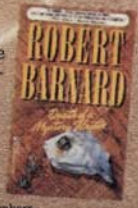

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a *NEW* short story by

HENRY SLESAR

Olivia, who had retired as Harley's secretary three months ago, had been sixty-two and slatlike. She had not been impressed with the work he did. Beryl thought it was super.

"It must be a good story this time," she said brightly. "I mean, I can always tell."

"You can?" Harley said.

"Yes. I mean, just from the expression on your face. Also, you're reading the third page. Usually if you don't like a story you never get past page two."

"That's true." Harley beamed and suggested they might talk some more. "Maybe at lunch—or supper, if you ever feel like working late."

"That would be absolutely—" Beryl struggled for the right word "—super," *she said.*

Entertainment, reliable and more, from Henry Slesar, whose The Grey Flannel Shroud *won him an Edgar in 1959 and one of whose greatest fans was the light-hearted and cerebral P. G. Wodehouse . . .*

HARLEY'S DESTINY

by HENRY SLESAR

"There was no single reason why George Cleveland decided to kill his wife. It had been a cumulative decision, reached over eleven years of a marriage that had gone sour less than a month after the honeymoon. In fact, George still remembered the moment when his blurry feelings of amour were washed away by bitter resentment. He had overheard Priscilla on the phone to her friend

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Rachel, saying, 'You know, I never realized that George had such small bones.' It can be said that George's destiny as an uxoricide was determined right then and there."

Harley Ammons flipped to the second page of the typed manuscript, but he didn't read any further. His eyes stared vacantly at the coffee stain on the page and he tried to recall how it got there. He couldn't remember. The story had crossed his desk almost a year ago and there had been dozens of coffee-stained pages since then, to say nothing of a hundred other wife-killing, husband-killing stories in the slush pile.

Harley had bought the story, paying the author the lowest rate offered by *Murder Mystery Magazine*. It was three cents a word for newcomers, and the name Josh Wellman was unfamiliar to him. Mr. Wellman had gotten his check, but not the satisfaction of publication. Harley's boss, Bob Ligner, sent him a memo that same week asking him to ease off on the spouse-killing stories. There had been eight in the last two issues and Ligner was getting weary of it. Harley slipped Wellman's manuscript into a file marked LATER.

Now the LATER file was on his desk, but not because Harley had decided it was time to publish "Perishing Priscilla." It had been Will Gatti who reminded him of the story, by mentioning Josh Wellman's name to him as they shared a seat on the 8:20 from Larchmont. Gatti was a police captain, an administrative type who got more thrills out of *Murder Mystery Magazine* than he did out of his job. On the train, however, he was reading his favorite part of *The Times*, the obituary pages, and he found a small item that merited comment.

"Ever hear of a writer named Josh Wellman?"

Harley shook his head, not making the connection.

"Says here he wrote mystery stories," Gatti said. "I figured you might have known him. Anyway, he's gone to the big slush pile in the sky."

Harley barely glanced at the item. Nineteen years of faded typewriter ribbons hadn't done his vision any good. There were only six lines in the obit, since Josh Wellman's history was meager and there were no surviving family members.

"No," Harley said, handing the paper back to him. "Never heard of the guy."

An hour later, in his shoebox office, Harley found Wellman's story and wondered why he had lied to Will. In truth, he had thought of "Perishing Priscilla" half a dozen times in the past twelve months. The story haunted him. Not because it had any special qualities—it

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was just another wife-killing story with the predictable biter-bit ending—but there was something special about the plot. Priscilla could well have been Caroline. Caroline was Harley's wife.

"George didn't know how Priscilla came by her hoarding habits. Maybe it was the effect of moving to Pottersville, the small town where the lawn-mower manufacturer who employed George had located his headquarters. The Clevelands had bought an old sixteen-room house of the type usually described as "rambling." George had other adjectives for it, especially in the winter when the thousand-gallon oil tank was cheerfully burning up his salary. When Priscilla discovered its capacious cellar, she found another way to spend it. She began buying canned foods. She said it was an investment, a hedge against inflation. There were almost a thousand cans in that cellar, some of them older than George's nine-year-old Buick."

Harley rested the manuscript on his paunch and leaned back, shutting his eyes just as he'd done the first time he read the story. He was visualizing Caroline's own cache of canned foods. She may not have hoarded a thousand cans in the twenty-one years of their marriage, but the specimens were older than the fictional George's Buick. The coincidence had struck him then, and kept him reading, just as it did now.

"It was a flooded basement that gave George his idea. There had been six days of incessant rain in April, and Priscilla's foul temper grew even fouler when muddy roads kept her from attending the Ladies Social meetings that filled her days. Her temper turned into a tantrum when she realized that the rainwater had seeped into the basement, threatening the labels on her precious food cans. She had—"

"Mr. Ammons?"

Harley looked up, almost guiltily, and blinked at Beryl. She was holding a coffee cup the size of a small birdbath. Harley wasn't accustomed to having a secretary bring him coffee every morning. But then, he wasn't accustomed to Beryl, who was still on the sunny side of thirty and definitely, definitely had breasts. Olivia, who had retired three months ago, had been sixty-two and slatlike. Nor had she been impressed with the work Harley did. Beryl thought it was *super*.

"It must be a good story this time," she said brightly. "I mean, I can always tell."

"You can?" Harley said.

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"Yes. I mean, just from the expression on your face. Also, you're reading the third page. Usually if you don't like a story you never get past page two."

"That's true." Harley beamed. "You're really observant, Beryl."

She shivered a little at the compliment. It sent a nice tremor through her body. Harley was suddenly conscious of his heartbeat. He took the coffee cup and said, "You know, I've been thinking about what you asked the other day—about reading the manuscripts before I do. It might not be a bad idea."

"Do you really mean it?" Beryl said. Her mouth formed a perfect O that became a Q when her pink tongue darted out. "Oh, Mr. Ammons, that would be so wonderful!"

"I'm not saying they'll pay you extra for it," Harley cautioned. "Company's too small to hire a reader or anything like that. But it'll be good experience in your next job."

"But I don't want a 'next job,' " Beryl said on cue, "I like this job. I just want to learn as much as I can from you, Mr. Ammons."

"Well, we'll talk about it some more. —Maybe at lunch," he added offhandedly. "Or supper, if you ever feel like working late. I often do, you know."

"That would be absolutely—" she struggled for the right word "—*super,*" she said.

When Beryl left, Harley's pulse rate was greater than ever. So was his interest in the manuscript.

"Sloshing around in ten inches of dirty black water, George Cleveland muttered words he never thought he knew. The flood was lapping at the bottom shelf of Priscilla's cans, licking at the labels of Grade A Cooked Carrots, Prunes in Syrup, Small White Potatoes, Chicken Soup with Noodles. He was almost tempted to dump them in the water and let the labels soak off the cans, happily visualizing Priscilla's frustration. Then he also visualized her rage and changed his mind. Dutifully, he began transferring the bottom cans to the higher shelves.

"When his wet, groping fingers found the peculiar bulge in a can of Montmorency Mixed Fruit Salad, he paused long enough to examine it under the basement's single, naked bulb. George had never seen a can in such odd configuration. The damned thing looked pregnant.

"Quickly, he waded back to the shelf and plucked out the adjacent can. It also contained Montmorency Fruit Salad and it was bulging the same way. He tried desperately to remember the word that was

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trying to push its way into his consciousness. It was a word he associated with bottles. But he was dealing in cans—why did he think of bottles?

"Another light bulb clicked on, but this one was in George Cleveland's brain.

"The word was *botulism.*"

Harley flipped the manuscript back to page one and hastily crammed it in the folder. It was all coming back to him now, the fevered idea he had when he first read Josh Wellman's contribution. The parallel between Priscilla and Caroline was too exact, his need for freedom too great, his loathing for his wife too overwhelming. But of course the whole notion of copying Josh Wellman's murder plot was too ridiculous, too bizarre, and, most of all, too impractical. He couldn't very well publish a story and then murder his wife in the identical manner. Even when Ligner's memo gave him the perfect excuse *not* to publish it and yet remove it from circulation, the idea was still untenable. The author, after all, was still alive.

The author was alive.

Harley stared into his coffee cup and then bellowed for his secretary. When Beryl raced in, he charged her with the responsibility of finding a copy of the morning *Times*. She responded with admirable speed and Harley was able to peruse Josh Wellman's obituary at his leisure. Brief as it was, it was satisfying. Or was the word "exhilarating"?

But like a dream whose memory slowly fades during the waking hours, so did Harley's excitement. By the time he stepped aboard the 5:40 to Larchmont, he looked rumpled and defeated. He became conscious of his paunch, of the thinning spot on the back of his head. He looked at the jowly face reflected in the window glass and tried to see another vision: a young man in a tweedy jacket, whose keen but brooding eyes looked out at the world with amused irony and piercing intelligence from the back cover of a novel called— But then, Harley had never even named his novel, much less started it.

He blamed Caroline for that, too. She hadn't encouraged his ambitions. She pointed out, with leaden logic, that if he really yearned to write, then why didn't he; instead of talking about it all the time? Instead of grumbling about the authors he edited, declaring that he could write rings around them if only he had the time? Harley's reasonable suggestion that he take a year off was met with a braying laugh. Caroline, an advertising copywriter who earned as much as

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he did and had a trust fund in the bargain, had no intention of supporting him or his illusions. No, that wasn't the word she used. It was delusions.

Harley, remembering the moment, winced at his reflection. The young man with the keen and brooding eyes was gone. Now there was only a middle-aged man, whose eyes were—what? Harley looked again. Usually, they were soft, brown, and unfocused. Now they were downright hard, black, and—yes, deadly. "The Man with the Deadly Eyes." Harley pulled out his notepad and wrote down the title. It would look good on the cover of *Murder Mystery Magazine.* Never mind the hapless author who would object to having his own title changed.

His mood lightened, Harley snapped open his attache case and took out the manuscript he had intended to read on the journey home. He frowned when he realized that he'd accidentally taken "Perishing Priscilla" instead. It was patented Freud, he thought wryly. Or maybe it was Fate.

"George Cleveland never thought of himself as a clever man. The lawn-mower business called for diligence and common sense. He told customers with a chuckle, 'We're in the business of cutting grass, not throats.' His low-pressure tactics were rewarded. Everybody liked George. Except, of course, his wife.

"But arranging for Priscilla to perish would take cleverness—that much was certain. It wasn't enough to simply open the can of poisonous fruit salad and serve it to her at dinner. As isolated as they were, five miles from their nearest neighbor, they weren't safe from gossip. Everyone in Pottersville knew that George and his wife 'didn't get along.' Shambling old Sheriff Yates was far from being a hayseed cop: he read thick tomes on criminal investigation and forensic medicine, probably hoping against hope for a good sensational murder in his jurisdiction. The county coroner was a physician with a shrewd diagnostic eye. No, George couldn't rely on official bumbling to make the verdict on Priscilla 'Death by Misadventure' rather than 'Death by Murder.'

"Then the solution occurred to him. Great solutions are often simple, like Einstein's formula. This one involved nothing more than a visit to the Grand Forks Supermarket."

Caroline was at the wheel of the station wagon when Harley stepped off the train. She had been to the supermarket herself. The folded-down rear seat was covered with brown-paper bags, bulging

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with bottles and cans and paper towels, can openers and corkscrews in their blister packages, shrink-wrapped tomatoes and cuts of meat, soft drinks and breakfast cereals, and enough dogfood to stage a banquet at Bide-a-Wee. Harley often wondered what became of all the purchases Caroline made at the supermarket. They didn't seem to appear at the dinner table. More often than not, Caroline was perfectly willing to let Harley fix his own meals from what he could find in the refrigerator. He rarely found much. It wouldn't have mattered, anyway. Harley was a hopeless cook. Unlike George Cleveland.

"It was Mexican food that started the romance between George and Priscilla. They had met at The Big Enchilada, a fast-food emporium specializing in South of the Border cuisine. She had been even more intrigued when she learned that George could cook his own Mexican specialties, having taken a night course. Once a week, ever since they married, George did the cooking Mexican style. He also chose the dessert. And what could be better after hot tamales than a nice cool fruit salad?

"George was in the fruit-salad section the next Saturday afternoon. The market was crowded as usual, but George found safety in numbers. In the bustling ballet taking place between the aisles, nobody noticed that one customer was performing an act of negative pilfering. He was putting something *on* the shelf.

"He had planned to wait half an hour before pointing out the peculiar can of Montmorency Fruit Salad, but he began to worry. What if someone actually bought the damned thing? He grew too nervous to wait longer than ten minutes. He strolled back to the shelf, and sure enough, there was a stout lady poking among the cans, her chubby fingers touching *the* can itself.

"'Oh, my God!' She gasped suddenly, and George's heart leaped with pleasure. Luckily, the lady was either knowledgeable or paranoid. 'Look at this!' she said to the world at large. 'Do you know what this is?'

"She clamped two fingers on the lid of the can and gingerly deposited it in her shopping cart, then swiftly wheeled it to the manager's desk. You could almost imagine smoke streaming from her ears.

George waited around only long enough to hear the shrill cries of protest emerging from the little glass cubicle. Then he left, anxious to get dinner started . . ."

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Life imitates art, Harley Ammons thought, but not always. He had been searching Caroline's larder for the past hour, scrutinizing every can for signs of imperfection. He had found some oddly dented cans, some with rust beneath their labels, even a few with suspicious bulges, but there was nothing that approximated the "pregnant" definition in Josh Wellman's work of fiction. It had been a clever enough ruse on George Cleveland's part, but his author had been helpful enough to place two identical botulism-tainted cans of fruit salad in his cellar. Caroline, unfortunately, hadn't been so obliging.

Finally, Harley gave up the search. He was almost ready to give up the entire idea. The next morning, he took Josh Wellman's manuscript back to the office and prepared to release it for publication. If nothing else, he would earn some points for reducing that month's story budget. He even thought of writing a brief introduction of posthumous praise for the author.

It was Beryl who stopped him. She came in with the birdbath of coffee as usual, but there was an unfamiliar liquid on her face. Tears. Gently, Harley inquired about them, shutting the door to insure privacy. Between sobs, Beryl told him that she had fought with her boy friend the night before. They were definitely through—finished forever and ever, Beryl said, and she was glad because he was, well, not *mature* enough for her. She put her head on Harley's chest—a bit awkwardly since she was an inch taller than the editor.

She was calmer when she left, but Harley wasn't. He was so unnerved he forgot all about his publication plans for "Perishing Priscilla." He rediscovered the manuscript on his desk after lunch and picked it up once again.

"The fruit salad was carefully transferred to a glass bowl and neatly covered with Saran Wrap. The original can, no longer quite so swollen after opening, was in a plastic trashbag, but George made sure the bag was in no danger of pickup from the twice-weekly rubbish collectors who covered the neighborhood. He knew the can would be vital evidence for the cor—— He stopped his own thoughts in midstream. He mustn't think about police or coroners just yet.

"The first report came on the early evening news. Priscilla didn't hear it—she was at a meeting of the Ladies Aid Society—but George heard it, and George was happy. It was a warning about Montmorency Fruit Cocktail, in cans marked with Lot Number G-100. The announcer stressed the low level of the alarm: the lot number had been dispensed with five years ago and there was little chance of

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anyone finding a sample in possession. Nevertheless, since one ingredient of the cocktail was *C. botulinum* bacteria, it was best to be cautious. Harley had been exactly that and he couldn't help but congratulate himself.

"That night Priscilla arrived home tired and irritable, and George was sympathetic. 'You're working too hard, honey,' he said solicitously. 'You'll feel better after a little chile con carne and a nice refreshing dessert.'"

The miracle happened that weekend.

Harley had forgotten it was Caroline's mother's seventy-fifth birthday and that he had agreed to a visit despite an eighty-mile drive and the certainty of stifling boredom. Her mother lived in a tall skinny house in Dutchess County and had a mortal fear of sunlight and fresh air. Harley once suggested that she was a vampire and Caroline hadn't spoken to him for a week. He still thought of that week fondly.

That afternoon, Harley sat in Mother Gertrude's dark, airless parlor while mother and daughter complained to each other about the inequities of life. Then Caroline seemed to notice he was there. She said:

"Harley, why don't you see about the light?"

"What light?"

"Haven't you been listening, for heaven's sake? Mama says the light in her cellar doesn't go on. Take a look at it."

Harley was only too happy to oblige, even if his knowledge of electrical matters was limited to battery-operated devices. He went to the cellar and quickly determined that the bulb needed changing. Pleased with his expertise, he found a replacement and soon had the place bathed in an unflattering glare. Mother Gertrude had obviously neglected the cellar's hygiene for years. He was about to leave it with relief when he saw the cans.

Now he knew where Caroline got her habit of thrift. She had inherited it. Mother Gertrude's collection of canned foodstuffs made her daughter's hoard seem minuscule. Then he realized that someone had actually intended the cellar to be a bomb shelter. Judging from the hundreds of cans on the shelves, they must have been expecting a long, long war.

Curious, Harley began examining the labels. There were brands he'd never heard of in his life, even some foods he'd never heard of—several he never wanted to hear of again. With his stomach still

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trying to deal with Mother Gertrude's lunch (it was a lamb stew, he hoped), the sight of the faded pictures on the labels was doubly repellent.

He started to reach for the beaded chain on the hanging light fixture—and stopped when he saw the Italian Tomato Sauce.

The tomatoes on the label didn't look well. They were squat and misshapen. They looked swollen and unhealthy. Only it wasn't a fault in the artist's rendering—it was the can itself that was distorted. It suffered from a diabolic inner pressure, a noxious, gaseous alteration that had taken place in the dark.

Slowly, almost reverently, Harley approached the shelf and lifted the can. It seemed alive in his hand. It was an aliveness neither good nor evil. It was just *there.*

And best of all, so were the others.

There were three more cans of Italian Tomato Sauce on the same shelf, each as swollen as the other—tumescent with *C. botulinum* bacteria. Thanks to Mother Gertrude (and to think how he had resisted this visit), he had twice the potential for a happy future than Josh Wellman had given his man George!

"The dinner was a success in every way but one. There wasn't enough of it. George knew Priscilla was far from satisfied. She scraped up every last vestige of her chile con carne, every bit of tortilla. She drank her Mexican beer down to the last drop. She stared hungrily at the scraps on George's plate, but she was determined not to ask for more. Priscilla maintained the illusion that she had a tiny appetite and she simply waited impatiently for dessert.

"That was when George went to get the fruit salad.

"It wasn't there.

"At first he thought Priscilla had moved it. She was always moving things around in the refrigerator.

"'Have you moved anything?' he asked, returning to the table.

" 'Moved what?'

" 'It was a red bowl. Covered with Saran Wrap. On the bottom shelf.'

" 'Oh,' Priscilla said. 'You mean the bowl with the fruit?'

" 'Yes,' George said, trying to remain calm. 'What did you do with it?'

" 'Oh, gosh,' Priscilla said, 'I was hoping you wouldn't notice.'

" 'Notice what?' George said, beginning to feel ill.

" 'What I did tonight. You see, I forgot to buy fresh fruit, so I

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thought you wouldn't mind if just this once I used the canned stuff. I mean, I didn't know you meant it for dessert, George. We never have fruit salad for dessert.'

" 'I just thought it would be a nice change,' George said, meaning every word. 'Do you mean you ate it, Priscilla? Is that what you did? Had yourself a little afternoon snack?'

" 'No,' she giggled, 'I didn't do that, George. You know I have a tiny appetite.'

" 'Then what *did* you do with it, Priscilla?' George asked, deciding to sit down. 'Just where is that fruit salad?'

" 'It's in your Sangria,' Priscilla said. And they both looked at his empty glass."

Harley came to the last page of Josh Wellman's manuscript and frowned the same way he had at his first reading. Cute ending. Cute. Not too plausible, of course. The author should have mentioned that Priscilla made the drinks on their Mexican nights. Of course, that might have given away the twist. Then there was another problem. How many readers knew that Sangria was wine and fruit? If you didn't know, the whole point was lost. Harley shrugged. What difference did it make, anyway? Nobody was going to read "Perishing Priscilla." He picked up the large shears and began to shred.

Within five minutes, the manuscript was gone and Beryl came in to wish him a nice weekend. He knew it would be.

On Saturday morning, Harley surprised Caroline by offering to do the shopping. Caroline was delighted. There was a meeting of the Lawn Bowling committee, the Spring Dance committee, and the Hospital Ladies scheduled and now she could attend all of them. She kissed him a grateful goodbye at the door and handed him a list. It included steak for dinner, but he said, "I've got an idea. How about spaghetti?" Caroline, a pasta fanatic, heartily concurred.

Harley didn't go to one supermarket that day, he went to three. He left a bloated can of Italian Sauce in each one. In the last market, he did all his shopping, including a jar of Mama Mia's Real Italian Tomato Sauce.

When he returned to the empty house, he emptied the contents of the Mama Mia's jar down the sink, then he opened the fourth and last bulging can of Real Italian Tomato Sauce and filled the Mama Mia's jar again. Just as the fictional George had done in Josh Wellman's story, he made sure the original can was saved.

Harley had three drinks before dinner that night, one more than

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usual, but Caroline didn't notice. She was too busy telling him about her day, crowing happily about her triumphs over this or that doyenne of this or that committee. He watched her at the stove, looking at her broad-beamed figure without any particular malice. On this, the last day of her life, Harley felt almost benign toward his wife.

The spaghetti was ready soon—Caroline preferred it *al dente*. She opened the jar of Mama Mia's and glanced briefly at the label before pouring the sauce over the steaming pasta.

When she brought it to the table, Harley looked at it and tried to remember Beryl's face.

As usual, Caroline didn't wait for him to begin. She picked up her copy of *Town & Country* and began to read. It was a typical evening at home.

Half an hour later, Caroline left the table to call her friends and relate the story of her day's committee successes. She hadn't noticed that Harley failed to eat his dinner.

Five hours later, she was complaining of nausea, blurred vision, and a throat so dry she could barely speak. The dryness turned into constriction. She began to make strangling sounds so difficult to understand that Harley could hardly decipher her plea for a doctor. That's what he told Dr. Kornfeld, who arrived too late for a tracheotomy to do any good. She died at two-thirty A.M. The first warning-bulletin about Real Italian Tomato Sauce was on the local news at eight the next morning.

Harley didn't congratulate himself too soon. He had spent most of his life reading about diabolically clever killers who forgot just one thing. He was only too aware of the thousand twists of fate that could turn a perfect murder imperfect. He had been conditioned by several hundred mystery authors, all dedicated to prove that the biter gets bit, that the killer gets caught in his own web, that crime doesn't pay.

But two weeks after Caroline's funeral, at which he played the part of grieving widower to perfection, Harley's doubts began to ease. Of *course* murder will out—in fiction. Of *course* crime doesn't pay—authors. But this was real life, and real life was rarely so neatly plotted as the stories he published in *Murder Mystery Magazine*.

Harley began to relax. He began to smile again—the wan, tentative smile of the recently bereaved. The smile touched the hearts of those who knew him. They said Harley was very brave. Beryl

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thought he was brave, too. She thought he was wonderful. She invited him to her apartment for a home-cooked meal. Harley had a momentary tremor when he realized she was going to serve spaghetti. Was this going to be the final irony? But it wasn't. The spaghetti was perfectly all right, the sauce tasty and spicy. So was Beryl.

Harley returned to work three weeks after Caroline's death, now utterly confident that truth was not only stranger than fiction, it was also more satisfying.

He didn't feel the slightest pang of guilt or concern when a cop appeared in his office that first morning—especially since the cop was his friend, Will Gatti.

After a few awkward words of sympathy, Harley asked the Captain if he'd like a freebie. He tossed the latest issue of *Murder Mystery Magazine* at him and Gatti flipped through the pages with his thick thumbs, stopping at the table of contents.

"Murder Is Easy," he said gravely. Harley blinked at him. "Title of the first story," Gatti said. "Half your stories have 'murder' or 'death' in the title. Is that deliberate?"

"It's the name of the game," Harley smiled.

"Pretty ingenious, some of them. Ever worry about giving people ideas, Harley?"

The editor slid his chair back six inches. "We're not an instruction manual, Will. We just tell stories."

"Still, some of these plots could be used in real life. Take this one, for instance."

Gatti opened his attache case and removed a digest-size magazine with a dogeared cover. Harley recognized it at once. It was *Zesty Detective*, a one-time competitor, mercifully discontinued by its publisher some eight years ago. He took it from Gatti's hand and looked at the semi-nude blonde who was caressing a .32 suggestively. The cover story was called "Death Is the Best Diet," by an author named Hugo Grimm.

"Ever read this story, Harley? You might find it interesting."

"I never read garbage like this, Will," Ammons said. But something in the Captain's eyes made him flip to the first page.

"There was no single reason why Harry Johnson decided to kill his wife. It had been a cumulative decision, reached over eleven years of a marriage that had gone sour less than a month after the honeymoon. In fact, Harry still remembered—"

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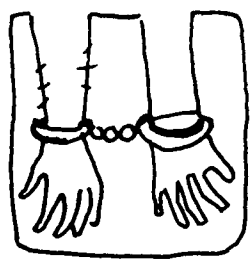
Harley looked up from the page into Captain Gatti's eyes and saw something he'd never seen there before—never seen in any eyes before.

"I thought I remembered the story," Gatti said. "Searched my attic for a week until I found it. Read it and you'll see what I mean about giving people ideas—only, of course, you've already read it."

"I never read *Zesty Detective* in my life!"

Gatti gave him a flat look, leaned back, and began to read the story aloud—and Harley suddenly realized the truth. Josh Wellman and he were both plagiarists.



DETECTIVERSE

THE GARDEN PLOT

by ALICE RUDOSKI

Millie hoed and raked and shoveled.
Joe directed from the side,
Pointing out that rows were crooked,
Or too narrow or too wide.
Millie, dutiful and silent,
Straightened each offending row—
Then she planted turnips, lettuce,
Cabbage, radishes, and Joe.

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first publication in the U.S.

This story, which takes place on the twentieth anniversary of President Kennedy's assassination, won first prize in London's The Fiction Magazine *Crime Story Competition in 1984. It was Kate Kirby's first story to be published. She is a freelance journalist working in London.*

"Like your last caller," Bill from Basingstoke told Dave Adler and his London Sound listeners, "I was just sitting down to my tea. I remember it like it was yesterday. We had chips and beans, as I recall. No, wait a minute, tell a lie, it was egg and chips, though I couldn't swear to the egg. I do know it was definitely chips. We always had them on a Thursday when my wife was alive."

"It was a Friday."

"What was a Friday, Dave?"

"Kennedy died on a Friday."

"Oh, a Friday! Well, that's different . . ."

CROYDON AND CAMELOT

by KATE KIRBY

"Hello, Bill in Basingstoke. Hello, Bill?" Dave Adler fails to keep the pleading note from his voice. The irritating crackling sound seeping through his headphones can only mean that Bill has deserted his post at the other end of the telephone line and is probably, at that minute, brewing up in his Basingstoke bedsit.

The morning's radio phone-in program is only half over and already Dave has coped with three callers hanging up the moment he is supposed to talk to them, and a fourth who had dialed in to complain about a groin injury under the mistaken impression that

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the London Sound doctor was taking his on-air surgery. The rest of the callers have wittered aimlessly on.

Dave blames Phil, his producer. It was the latter's idea to devote the entire morning session to listeners' reminiscences of the Kennedy assassination twenty years earlier. Phil had said, "Come on, let's do it. It will be more interesting than getting some boring old politician to recap on what a great bloke JFK was." That all the London Sound listeners should have been having their tea when the news filtered through from Dallas had, of course, been unforeseeable. (An insight into the dietary habits of urban dwellers does not make for riveting radio.)

The crackling on Dave's headphones stops abruptly, to be replaced by the sound of breathing.

"Hello, Bill? Are you there or have you hung up on the listening millions?"

A thin, uncertain voice answers back, "Dave? Bill in Basingstoke, here. Am I on the air?"

"Yes, Bill, we're receiving you loud and clear here on London Sound, the people's radio network. And what were you doing on the evening you heard the news of Kennedy's assassination?"

There is a long pause before Bill says, "I'd just like to say how much I enjoy listening to your program. I'm a pensioner and I tune in every morning."

On the other side of Dave's glass-fronted cubicle, Phil mimes a yawn, and then throws his eyes up to heaven as the monologue continues with the by now familiar phrase.

"Like your last caller, I was just sitting down to my tea. I remember it like it was yesterday. We had chips and beans, as I recall. No, wait a minute, tell a lie, it was egg and chips, though I couldn't swear to the egg. I do know it was definitely chips. We always had them on a Thursday when my wife was alive."

"It was a Friday."

"What was a Friday, Dave?"

"Kennedy died on a Friday."

"Oh, a Friday! Well, that's different. Fish . . ." There will be no stopping Basingstoke Bill now. Despite an attack of stage fright at the start of his radio debut, he is at last getting into his stride.

As far as Dave Adler is concerned, the whole business is a bloody bore. He was seven years old when the U.S. President was killed, and is unsure whether he even remembers the event or whether

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subsequent showings of the relevant film footage simply make him think he does.

Interrupting Bill, Dave throws in, "And what did you have for dinner yesterday?"

"Now you're asking." Bill warms to his subject and seems unaware of the question's irrelevance. "Was it beefburgers or was it a tin of those little pork sausages in baked beans? On second thoughts, it was one of those boil-in-the-bag stews. But what's that got to do with it?"

"You said you remembered what you were eating twenty years ago. I was simply taxing your memory on more recent events."

There is silence. The London Sound audience wait expectantly for confrontation; this is what live radio is all about.

Bill shouts into his mouthpiece, "You're a cheeky blighter. You've got an answer for everything, haven't you? Who the hell do you think you are?" The abuse continues long after the technicians have faded him out.

And now Louis from Epping is on the line. He is a regular caller to Dave Adler's program, considers himself something of a professional since he neither deviates nor fluffs his lines, and wouldn't mind taking up a second career in broadcasting. He has prepared his speech in advance:

"When Kennedy was in power," says Louis, "I was a sub-editor on a provincial daily. On that particular Friday, we'd just put the paper to bed, or so we thought. There were a couple of chaps left manning the night desk, but most of us were down the local. It must have been about 7:15 when the landlord's wife came into the bar carrying a transistor radio; she had the volume turned up full. She said something to her husband and he stopped serving drinks. The whole place fell silent while we listened to the announcer saying that the American President had been shot. All the newspaper chaps left their drinks and rushed back to the office.

"I can't remember what we'd intended to run on the front page, but whatever it was it was replaced with the news of the assassination. Usually when a good story broke, the atmosphere was electric, with staff rushing about and telephones ringing; no matter how tragic the event, there was always a feeling of 'Great! This will make good copy!' JFK's death was different. I don't think anybody wanted to sell newspapers on the strength of the headline I wrote that night: Kennedy Assassinated."

Dave, his mouth full of cheese sandwich, hadn't expected Louis'

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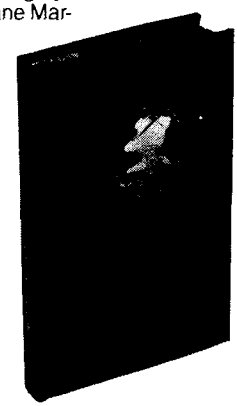

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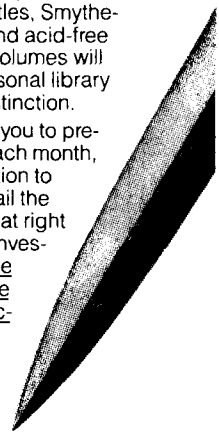

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contribution to end so suddenly. Swallowing quickly, he says, "Thank you, Louis. Very dramatic. It's nice to hear from someone who was writing history rather than having their tea. Time for a break now, followed by a report on London's traffic. Then it's over to Deirdre in Croydon."

Dave pulls off his headphones, stuffs the rest of his sandwich into his mouth, and goes for a pee.

Deirdre Watson was burying her husband at the bottom of her Croydon garden on the day President John F. Kennedy was shot. She had come in from shoveling earth onto the grave and was on her way through the living room to the bathroom to wash her hands when the *Tonight* program came on television. It was five past seven and the first item relayed the news of the shooting. Stunned, Deirdre stopped in her tracks. Kennedy was her hero. "Don't die. Please, don't die," she murmured as mud hardened beneath her fingernails and her husband's blood dried on her hands. At 7:27 a second newsflash announced the death of the President. Deirdre knelt on the carpet and wept.

Only when the *Tonight* program ended and the Harry Worth Show began was she able to collect herself, and for the first time noticed the indentations left by Simon's buttocks in the seat of the armchair. This vestige of her husband, similar to the fossilized impressions left by animals from a prehistoric age, brought her to her senses. Later she would explore her grief; first there was the living room to clean up and damning evidence to destroy. But while she scrubbed at the carpet, she could not stop hot tears coming to her eyes. She was uncertain whether she wept for Simon's death and her part in it or for Jackie's loss and the brutality of the assassination. In truth, she had hated Simon, had wished him dead on several occasions, and, though she never imagined herself actually killing him, she yet managed to remain completely calm while doing so.

Her husband had been cruel to her, but not in the way that left physical bruises. He was mean; would not let her buy nice furnishings for the house even though they could well afford them. He argued that old things were comfortable things and cited as examples his scruffy sports jacket, which was dark with sweat and grime around the collar and cuffs, and the mattress with its lumpy hollows which he claimed perfectly accommodated their two bodies. He was not prepared to let Deirdre go out to work, with the result

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that she was totally dependent on him. "A woman's place is in the home" was only one of his many pompous sayings.

Another bone of contention had been the dog that she yearned to have but Simon refused to allow, claiming he was allergic to animal hairs. He didn't like her friends, hated her politics (but thought it pointless to debate them with her), derided her Kennedy scrapbook, and would not have sex with her, for which after a time she was thankful.

Why did they marry? In 1956 they thought they were in love; it was, coincidentally, the year John wed Jackie. However, it soon became clear to Deirdre that Simon was the very antithesis of John, who was the type of husband she would most liked to have had. John with his record of bravery in the Pacific during the Second World War; Simon with his medical papers excusing him from military service. John with his charming smile and athletic body; Simon without either of these. The comparisons were almost too painful to contemplate.

As Deirdre wrapped the blood-stained armchair cover in newspaper, she experienced little guilt—only numbness. That she should be cleaning up the evidence of Simon's death was somehow fitting. After all, wiping and dusting in her husband's wake had been a consistent feature of their marriage. Wherever he went he left behind tangible proof of his existence. His dandruff found its way from his coat collar onto hers. When he cut his toenails in the bathroom, nine of the clippings would drop to the floor, falling into the cracks between the carpet tiles, and the tenth would catapult across the room, embedding itself in the soap. He would smoke his cigarettes almost down to the butts before knocking the ash into an ashtray, with the result that most of it dropped onto the sheets, the tablecloth, the television page of the *Daily Telegraph*. His buttery fingerprints were on the telephone, his breath frosted the mirror in the hall, and when he ate cream crackers he dropped crumbs over a wide area, leaving a trail like Hansel and Gretel's.

Deirdre put up with all this for seven years; seven years of crumbs and ash and Simon spitting when he talked. Then at five o'clock on Friday, November the twenty-second, she cracked.

If Simon had not been at home for the previous two weeks, convalescing from a cold, it might never have happened; the couple might have gone on to celebrate their ruby wedding. But when on the morning of the twenty-second Deirdre had woken to find her mouth pressed against his stiff and crumpled handkerchief and then

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later, in the afternoon, heard the elephantine sound of him blowing his nose for the seventeenth time that day, something inside her simply snapped. Her self-control, which showed itself in her always taut muscles and deeply lined forehead, deserted her.

Neither she nor Simon knew this until two minutes later, during which time he drained his cup of tea, called for another, inhaled on his twenty-first cigarette of the day, and was leaning forward to stub it out in the overflowing ashtray when Deirdre plunged the meat knife into his back. Simon screamed wildly, attempted to raise himself from the seat, slumped forward, and then became still. His widow went into the garden to widen and deepen the trench that was to have taken the autumn potatoes.

Throughout the burial, Deirdre showed no emotion; she really might have been planting next year's crop. Before earthing over the corpse, she collected its passport, pajamas, shaving kit, and washbag and arranged these around the body, just as the ancient Egyptians had placed in pharaohs' tombs such items as might prove useful in the afterlife. Although not especially cunning, Deirdre had read enough detective novels to know that the absence of these personal effects would lead the police to conclude that her husband had left her. The subterfuge was intended only as a temporary measure; she did not plan to mislead the authorities for any length of time, but merely wished to delay for a short while the moment for confession. She was not to know then that the façade could last.

She returned to the house. While she wiped her shoes on the mat, Robert Robinson wound up *Points of View* and the *Tonight* team prepared to go on the air with the Kennedy story.

Later that night, clutching the pillow to herself, Deirdre lay in bed and wept. The Cuban crisis the autumn before had brought the world to the brink of disaster—but hadn't he called Khrushchev's bluff, winning through in the end? And what about his interest in Civil Rights, admittedly only just beginning to make itself felt—what might he have achieved had he been allowed another term in office? Fragments from his speeches repeated themselves over and over in her mind. Aloud, she said, "You were a beacon of hope not just for me but for the rest of the world." Deirdre had followed his political career, plotted his campaigns, read everything she could find about him and Jackie in the gossip columns. No British politician had ever fired her imagination or raised her political awareness in the way he had done. And he was so young and now he was dead.

Simon was dead, too, of course, but she did not allow herself to

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consider this. She thought, There will be time to contemplate my debt to Simon when I'm rotting in Holloway. Any sorrow she felt for him was buried beneath a greater grief. Her responsibility for his murder was absorbed into a greater guilt—a guilt she bitterly assumed she shared with a million others: namely, those she saw as belonging to a nation that trumpeted democracy as though their country had invented it and then refused the ballot box in favor of the assassin's bullet.

The following day, Deirdre reported Simon missing. The police reassured her that it was not unknown for husbands to disappear for brief spells. A brisk WPC asked several questions ("Did he take anything with him? Passport? Pajamas?"), took notes, and promised to circulate a photograph. A young officer quipped, "You don't think he took a plane to Dallas, do you?" Deirdre thought it was stupid bad taste.

As she left the police station, she caught sight of the desk sergeant's *Daily Telegraph*. In large type it announced, PRESIDENT KENNEDY IS ASSASSINATED, then in lower case: Shot in the Head in Open Car on Dallas Festival Drive. It had been the only news on the radio that morning, and on the bus home the passengers talked of nothing else. Deirdre had no intention of joining in. She looked out of the bus window. Nothing will ever be the same again, she thought.

With the funeral on Monday morning, the next few days were difficult ones for her. She arranged for a spray of white carnations to be sent to Arlington Cemetery, but doubted whether they would arrive in time. On the Monday, she wore a black armband about the house and sat for a long time flipping through her Kennedy scrapbook. Jackie would be being brave, so she must be, too. In all, twenty-nine heads of state, Prime Ministers from six countries, and representatives from four others attended the ceremony. In Croydon, no one commented on Simon's absence.

After a suitable interval of three months had elapsed, Deirdre asked her brother to tie up any loose ends at the TV repair shop Simon had run until his sudden disappearance. Later, she would sell the business. The police called round once, with an assurance of her husband's imminent return.

When one year was up, Simon's suits went to Oxfam and the rubbish he had accumulated over seven years went on a big bonfire. Deirdre bought a Slumberdown double bed, new covers for the armchairs, and a hearthrug that matched the drapes. Weeds had colo-

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nized the six-foot stretch of earth which concealed Simon's decomposing remains, and no one had come to arrest her. By 1968 she had a part-time job in a florist's around the corner, Jackie had married Onassis, and Deirdre had been wined and dined by three different suitors. About this time, her friends and relatives ceased to talk among themselves about poor, abandoned Deirdre; and the ready-packed overnight bag which she had planned to take with her in the event of bail being refused lay unused, gathering dust on top of the wardrobe.

Six years later, she was made manageress of the florist's and had turned down two offers of marriage. In 1975 she was given a delightful Dalmatian puppy by an old school friend who bred them. The dog in a way was similar to Simon, given as it was to shedding hairs about the place and leaving pungent odors beneath the eiderdown, where Deirdre rather indulgently allowed it to sleep. The arrival of forensic experts with pieces of chalk and flashbulb photography had not materialized.

When her self-control had deserted her eleven years earlier it had proved a temporary aberration, and the straightjacket she subsequently put on her emotions ensured she would never speak freely about her crime; she would confess only when accused. She did not doubt that an accusation would follow; it was simply a question of when. Perhaps the next-door neighbors had seen her burying something near the compost heap on the night Simon disappeared and it wouldn't be long before they reported their suspicions to the police. Or perhaps the garden would have to be dug up to accommodate gas pipes, a gravel pit, or a new motorway—often this is how corpses are discovered and murder inquiries begun.

Nothing of the kind happened to Deirdre's garden. And with the passing of five, ten, then nearly twenty years without anyone pointing the finger of guilt at her, she really should have considered herself home and dry. Yet, as the possibility of discovery receded and after she had cleared every trace of Simon from the house, lost touch with his two surviving relatives, and at last persuaded the Inland Revenue to stop sending tax forms addressed to him, still she could not forget her crime.

More specifically, she could not forget a particular sensation that had been peculiar to his death. It was the moment the knife's sharp blade made contact with Simon's left lung, puncturing the thin-walled sac like a pin being pushed into a balloon, and in the same way that a balloon may not yield immediately so Deirdre felt the

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slight resistance put up by the elasticlike tissue. In her own mind, this physical sensation was connected with a series of visual images: the brief, jerky film footage showing Kennedy's assassination—John's head thrown back, Jackie cradling him in her arms, the crowd breaking away and scattering. Deirdre was forced to relive Simon's murder every time she saw the sequence shown on television, which it repeatedly was immediately following JFK's death, or when she saw the newspaper stills that froze forever the moment the first bullet entered the President's skull. Simply hearing John Kennedy's name spoken was enough to conjure echoes of Simon's agonized screams and the television babbling relentlessly on.

Thankfully, the intervals between these ghastly flashbacks increased as history marched forward and Kennedy's political legacy came to be seen as a bright, gold coin: a fake; his personal integrity: a fragile thing. Camelot crumbled. American Presidents came and went.

It is the autumn of 1983, Reagan is in power. Deirdre is running her own florist's, employing two young assistants, and making a healthy profit. Her relationship with a divorced man, whom she met at French evening classes, is going through a sticky patch: he wants her to move in with him but she is uncertain; her independence is something she greatly values. In October, she had a hysterectomy. Physically, she feels recovered but emotionally she still suffers from post-operative blues. Her doctor prescribes Valium.

In the weeks leading up to November 22, there can be few people in the Western world unaware of the date's significance. The media milk the occasion for all it is worth. Politicians are lined up for opinions and academics introduced to lend perspective. During interviews, old friends from Cape Cod and stalwart campaigners from Washington rebuild the legend while political enemies and slighted girl friends knock it down again. Two biographies are released, both called *Kennedy—The Truth*. They tell opposite sides of the same story. A woman who in the Sixties was a cleaner at the Book Depository Building—from where Lee Harvey Oswald fired his fatal shots—is paid a four-figure sum for her memoirs. A Kennedy look-alike competition held in Ohio gets broadcast on *News At Ten*. And the grainy Dallas film sequence, so obviously the work of an amateur movie maker who never expected a scoop, is shown again and again.

For Deirdre, the twenty-second is a double anniversary.

Out in the garden the Dalmatian lumbers heavily across the lawn.

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Its coat, once reminiscent of fine vellum spattered with inky blobs, has aged—the parchment yellowed, the dark spots faded. From the transistor radio on the kitchen table, a tinny voice fills the room: "It's Dave Adler here for London Sound, the people's network. Anyone out there who wants to phone in and tell the capital just what they were up to on the night Kennedy died has only to pick up their receiver and dial now. After a quick weather check we're going straight over to Deirdre in Croydon. Sorry to keep you waiting, love. We'll be with you in a moment."

Deirdre holds the receiver so tightly her knuckles are white. She must try to stop crying. She waits. From the kitchen window she can see the dog, nose pressed close to the ground, snuffling among the autumn leaves on Simon's grave like a pig hunting for truffles.

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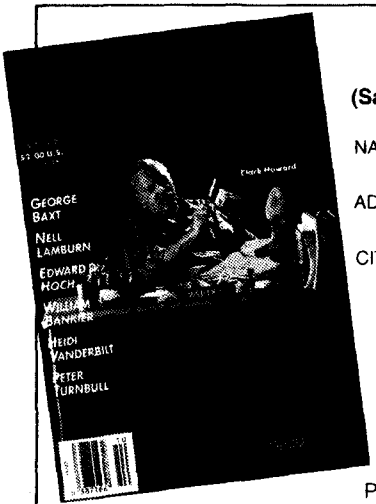

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"Kim doesn't like you, Abigail," Bess said. "And Jed wouldn't understand. If I told him about our conversations, he'd figure Kim is right—that I'm just a crazy old woman who belongs in a nursing home . . ."

PHOTO FINISH

by MARY H. FOLGER

Kim had said she'd be back in less than an hour.

Less than an hour, Bess Kendall thought, was not very much time to get to the garage and rescue and hide Abigail. But she would do it. If it was the last thing she ever did, she would rescue Abigail.

Bess pushed herself out of the chair and hobbled to the kitchen. Standing and walking were not as simple as they had been fifty years ago when Bess had come to the house on Big Bend Creek as a bride. Nor, for that matter, as simple as they had been last year when Jed brought Kim home and said, "Mom, this is your new daughter-in-law."

Just a child, Bess had thought. Too young for Jed. Why did he elope with a child?

Later, she understood. Child or not, Kim someway always managed to get her own way.

Bess had gritted her teeth until her mouth was sore, but she would never, she knew, say a bad word about her daughter-in-law—not to Jed, not to anybody. That was just the way she was, and she couldn't help it. She didn't believe in airing her dirty laundry in public.

It was a good thing she enjoyed the housework, Bess often thought, because Kim certainly wasn't about to do anything—except find ways to spend other people's money.

But Kim wasn't important now.

Abigail was.

Leaning heavily on the broom handle that she preferred over a cane, Bess limped across the lawn to the garage. The door was open and she peered into the dimness. It was hot, breathless. Nothing

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moved, not the dogs lazing in a corner, not the flies on the ceiling, not even the air.

Bess stepped inside the door and paused to catch her breath. There, spread all over the garage, were the items Kim had collected for the garage sale. So much, and yet so little. The odds and ends of a lifetime. Bess's lifetime. The stuff left over after Kim had sorted out what she wanted. "We can sell this junk," Kim had said. "It doesn't look like much, but one man's trash is another's treasure."

Your trash, my treasure, Bess thought. Art's beat-up bentwood desk chair with the worn-out cushion. The oversized maple hutch that Art and Jed had made for her that Christmas so long ago. The china she'd loved so much and the stuff Kim called "miscellaneous antiques"—the things that had been handed down from generation to generation in both her and Art's families.

And Abigail.

If Kim wanted to sell the rest, Bess supposed it would have to be all right. But she would not—could not—sell Abigail.

Bess sat heavily in Art's old chair and looked straight at Abigail. Abigail, her black hair in a bun on her neck, her black dress buttoned up to the high collar, her black eyes set deep in the grey face, seemed to look back from the ornate gilt frame.

"Kim doesn't like you, Abigail," Bess said. "And Jed wouldn't understand. If I told him about our conversations, he'd figure Kim is right—that I'm just a crazy old woman who belongs in a nursing home." She continued to stare at the dark eyes of the ancient photo.

"Remember, Abigail," she said, "when Art and I first came to this house? It was just before we got married. We both knew we couldn't afford the place—not even with his family offering it to us cheap because it had been his grandparents'. We were so young, so dumb about everything, but we knew we couldn't afford the house.

"And I stood there in the living room and looked at you. I thought about how much the house must have meant to you, and how much I loved it, too. My first day in it, and I loved it already."

Bess lapsed into silence and remembered alone. She recalled how that was a time when few women worked and when jobs were next to impossible to find, even for men.

But on that day almost fifty years ago, Bess had looked at the photo on the living-room wall and had thought, The bookkeeper at the bank is leaving. I'll go down tomorrow and tell them I want that job and that I want to borrow enough to buy the house on Big Bend Creek.

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In less than a week, she'd had both the job and the money.

"That was just the first time the answers came when I talked with you, Abigail."

There had been many more, Bess remembered. It seemed that each time she'd faced a crisis, she'd found what she needed—either answers or strength—from the face in the photo on the living-room wall.

It was not, Bess had told herself a hundred times through the years, that she believed Abigail was talking to her or putting words into her head. Bess was much too sensible for any such nonsense as that. Still, Abigail was much more than a photograph of one of Art's ancestors. She was a friend.

"And now," Bess said, looking again into the stern black eyes of the picture, "I'm an old woman, Abigail. I've done dumb things. Like deeding the house over to Jed, thinking he'd be sure I could always stay here and wouldn't ever have to go to a nursing home."

Now everything was wrong. Just because Kim had married Jed, everything was half hers. Nothing was Bess's. Not even her home on Big Bend Creek.

Not even Abigail.

"She says you'll bring a lot of money, Abigail, and even more if your face stays in the frame. I told her you stay with the house, but she said I'm just a doddering old fool, which I guess I am, sitting here telling my troubles to a photograph."

Bess stood, got her stiff feet and legs in motion, and pulled the picture from the sawhorses. "We'll get you back to the house, Abigail. We'll hide you where Kim won't think to look."

The afternoon sun was blinding, and the heat of the back yard was even worse than the stifling stillness of the garage.

There's time, Bess thought, to go to the lookout. It would be cooler there, and it was so pretty on the boulder at the back of the yard—the one that jutted out so people could look down onto the treetops in the ravine below.

By bending just a bit and using the fancy gilt frame as a cane, Bess made it to the rock. She smiled as she thought of days gone by, the good days when she and Art and Jed had played so far below, picnicking, climbing rocks, and swimming in the white water. It had been a good life until Kim.

"Kim never did like this place, Abigail. Never liked Big Bend Creek. Never liked the house, either. Or me. I tried, Abigail. I

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minded my own business and I never said a bad word about her. Never told Jed how she talked to me. But she just never liked me."

Bess turned reluctantly away from the green cavern surrounding Big Bend Creek and looked again into the bright sun of the back yard.

And at Kim, standing beside the garage, staring.

"You fool!" Kim shrieked. "You old fool! Look what you're doing to that picture frame, dragging it like that! You can barely walk, and you're out there where one wrong step will put you at the bottom of the ravine!"

Bess watched, frozen, as her daughter-in-law's expression turned to stone. "One wrong step," Kim repeated.

She inched forward, menacing, threatening.

Everything shifted into slow motion. Bess heard every sound magnified. Kim's footsteps on the crackling dry grass. A truck cresting the hill. A gust of wind.

The gust of wind—and the photo in Bess's hand seemed to come alive. Catching in the sharp breeze, the heavy frame broke away from her clutching fingers and toppled just as Kim stepped onto the boulder.

Later Bess wasn't sure exactly what had happened. It seemed as though the picture was caught in a miniature whirlwind, or as if it had a life of its own. It crashed toward Kim's knees. Kim tripped, then slipped. Trying frantically to find something to clutch, she slid slowly down the slanted face of the stone.

Her scream grew louder as she clawed frantically at the edge of the jutting boulder, then died away to silence as she plummeted through the treetops toward the white water far below.

The truck screeched to a halt in front of the garage.

"Mom—are you all right?"

"Jed, the picture got away from me!"

"I know, I saw. Come on—let's get you into the house."

Bess gripped the picture frame all the way in.

Later, after the police had come and gone away satisfied and Jed had left for the funeral home, Bess looked long and hard at the damaged picture propped against the living-room wall.

"Abigail," she said, "if I didn't know better, I'd think— But I do know better, and I won't think it.

"It was that gust of wind, Abigail—the only wind we had all day."

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Howard hated ceremonies—he had been dragged to his daughter's wedding a year ago and had skipped the reception. He particularly hated funerals, and had even refused to attend his mother's three years earlier, paying his silent respects at the grave after everyone else had left.

Crimes of the past are not always made as relevant as in the three engaging stories that follow . . .

HOLES

by JONATHAN WOOD

Outside, rainy snow turned into snowy rain. Howard Humblemeyer stood looking out the window of his house, glad he hadn't gone with his wife, yet not particularly happy to be alone. He was forty-two, an age his travels in the Far East had taught him as one of great change, either for good or for bad. Because of this, perhaps, he felt troubled.

He wasn't bothered by the fact that his wife was driving out to their granddaughter's christening in Prairie Village, for she was a good driver and his tardiness in removing the snow tires from her car had become admirable foresight. He wasn't bothered by the fact that he wasn't attending. He hated ceremonies—he had been dragged to his daughter's wedding a year ago and had skipped the reception. He particularly hated funerals, and had even refused to attend his mother's three years earlier, paying his silent respects at her grave after everyone else had left. He was shy in front of people and thought it ridiculous to waste time and money on something that couldn't be enjoyed by the person it was for. It never occurred to him that funerals weren't for the dead.

Yet it was from then that his uneasiness had begun. It wasn't the grey creeping into his temples and sideburns. His company was

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sound, his job secure and rewarding, the house almost paid for. He loved his wife, she loved him, they had two bright, healthy daughters and now a granddaughter.

So, having gone over what his problem wasn't, he was disturbed to find that he couldn't figure out what it was. He finally decided just to call it a hole, a gap in his life, an empty part of him that had been hidden somewhere inside and had appeared one day soon after his mother died. Was it the fear of death? No—he had faced down that demon long before. He knew it wasn't a feeling of being alone, not while he had his family.

It had started as a speck of nothingness. But he had noticed it for that reason, and, like a hole in a roof that gets wider every time it rains, so this one grew the more he thought about it, probed at it. It was like a black hole that gets bigger the more matter it absorbs. The more he wondered about it, the more it seemed to pull at his mind. Yet he was patient. All he had to do was find out what it really was and he could deal with it. He trusted his ability to solve his problems by himself. But first he had to know what he was fighting against.

About 200 kilometers southeast of where Howard was struggling with his thoughts, Sheriff Jeremiah "Jeb" Blunt had a different sort of problem.

"Don't move, Jeb, or I'll have to do it again."

Jeb stiffened, clamping down on the cardboard in his mouth so hard his jaw muscles twitched.

"All right, that'll do." Doc Haynes had been Jeb's dentist for over twenty years. "You know, you're the jumpiest person that's ever set foot in my chair."

"Sorry, Doc, I just hate to have my teeth worked on."

"Well, if you've got pain you're going to need something done. I have a good idea what and I'll know for sure in a minute." He went off to his darkroom.

Jeb sat in the big vinyl-covered chair and began examining the array of shiny tools. He liked things he could hold in his hands, like hammers and drills, not picking and poking instruments that looked like something you ate walnuts with. His active mind jumped to the image of the dentist somehow getting a grip on the hurting molar with a nutcracker and he was heading for the door when Doc Haynes came back in.

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"Now, just sit right back down in that chair. You got yourself a little cavity and it won't take more than five minutes to fill it in."

At that instant, like a trumpeting charge of cavalry, Jeb's deputy sheriff skittered into the room. "Sheriff, come quick! They found a body up near Falcon!"

Trying unsuccessfully to sound sincere, Jeb said, "Sorry, Doc. Duty calls."

"Dan, you didn't tell me it was a hundred years old."

Dan Weaver—tall, thin, possessed of an Adam's apple that had a life of its own and a deep, booming voice that seemed to belong to someone else—stood beside Jeb, looking down at the grave and its contents. It was raining, a very cold rain that seemed wetter because of the cold.

"More like twenty-five to thirty, near as I can tell," said Dr. Slater, the county coroner. "Not embalmed, that's for sure."

They were standing in some woods about a kilometer behind a farmhouse owned by D. L. Dlugosh, some twelve kilometers outside Falcon. There were mostly oak trees around them, though Jeb, standing upwind of the body, smelled some pine not too far away. They were on the edge of a pasture, at the top of a small rise in the land.

"Any reason for me to be interested?" Jeb's tongue darted at the tooth with the cavity, exploring around the hole.

"I think so. Middle-aged male. Lot of blood on the clothes. No bone damage—maybe shot or stabbed in the abdomen. If the Dlugoshes' dog had been a little more careful with its excavation, I could tell you more."

"And buried out here. Well, it'll give old Willis something to write about at the paper, anyway." Jeb bent down, hand extended toward the skull. He touched the forehead, felt its hardness. "Well, pardner," he said, "I don't know who you are or how you got here, but I'll sure try to find out."

Back at the county courthouse in Gasconade, Jeb sat across from his deputy's desk while Dan went through the old missing-persons files of the Fifties. "Only two from around here who might fit the description," Dan said. "Of course, with our luck it's probably a stranger." He handed Jeb the first folder. "James Pines, listed as missing by his wife in nineteen fifty-five."

"Ran off with Mary Simpson up to St. Louis. Later divorced from

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his wife. Didn't marry Mary, though." Jeb shook his head. "Strike it from the records. Who's the other?"

"Franklin Humblemeyer. Never heard that name around here. Filed three times by wife, turned up the first two times in nineteen fifty-four and -six, no sign after reported missing in nineteen fifty-seven."

Jeb whistled. "And I thought I knew a few things. That's one I didn't."

"What do you mean?" asked Dan.

"I went to high school with Howie Humblemeyer. He was pretty smart, but real quiet. He and his mom moved to Kansas City after he graduated. Nobody got to know him very well, and I never knew anything about his dad."

"So?"

"So that farm we were at this morning. That's where they lived."

Howard was just finishing a late lunch when the phone rang. He figured it would be his wife and was prepared to tell her he was fine and ask her how Susan and the baby were, but he heard a man's gruff voice instead. "Howie? That you? This is Jeb Blunt down in Gasconade. Remember? We went to high school together."

Howard remembered easily. Jeb had been the kind of student leader in whose shadow others felt privileged to stand. Big, strong, easy-going, and cheerful. He had been the most popular boy in school and he had done it by being equally friendly to everyone.

"Yes, I remember. How are you?"

"Good. How's your wife?"

"All right." Howard knew that this was the time he should say he was now a proud grandfather, that any normal person would. But he felt his cheeks flush, felt nervous. He waited.

"I hope I didn't catch you at a busy time," Jeb said.

"No, no. I stopped working Saturdays a long time ago."

"Good. Well, you probably know I went and got myself elected sheriff here in Tanner County a few years ago and now I've got a big favor I want to ask of you."

"Is it something official?"

"Well, yes and no. It seems that a body turned up on the farm you used to live on and the coroner here thinks it dates back from around the time you were there."

He paused. When there was no response, he continued.

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"So I was wondering if you could come down here and take a look at it. You may be able to help us identify it."

Howard suddenly felt the hole looming in front of him, felt himself teetering on the edge of it, looking into its unfathomable depths. He tried to keep the fear out of his voice. "You think it's someone I know?"

"I have no idea. It was so long ago I'm sort of clutching at straws. If you could remember anything unusual or recognize something, it would be a big help. Oh, and I can't seem to get in touch with your mother."

"She died a few years ago from cancer."

"I'm sorry. I didn't know." Jeb paused. Then: "I don't mean to sound pushy, but it would sure help us out a lot if you could come. Do you think you could make it today? Before sunset? We'll pay your expenses and put you up for the night."

Howard looked outside. It had stopped raining and the March sun was shining wanly through the clouds. The mention of his mother had decided him. "Okay," he said—and stepped off into the darkness. As he fell, he heard his voice strung out eerily behind him. "I should be there around four."

"You got it," said Jeb. He didn't sound like he noticed anything strange. "Just come on out straight to the farm and I'll meet you there. See you later. And thanks."

Howard hung up the phone, and as he did the first scene opened in front of him. It was a kind of tableau where he was looking down at the farmhouse from above. He saw himself as a boy of twelve lying stiffly in his bed, eyes open, staring toward the ceiling. In the kitchen he saw his father and mother arguing as they had so many times, but he couldn't hear their voices. He knew, though, that his father was demanding money to go drinking, his mother refusing, telling him they needed it for food. He saw the big hand go back and then he and the child in bed closed their eyes, heard the smack of fist on flesh, the thud of his mother falling, the stamp and slam of his father leaving, the wet weeping of his mother, as he fell through the void.

He shook his head and opened his eyes. There's no turning back, he thought. I've got to see it through. He left a note to his wife and went outside. He'd have to take the pickup, but the ice on the roads was melting and he doubted there'd be any trouble down south. He heaved some chains in back to make sure and headed east along I-70 . . .

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"You think there's some connection, that that's his father?" asked Dan.

"I don't know, but I have an idea how we might find out if he knows something about it or not. Saw it on TV once, which means it probably has no chance of working, but we'll give it a try anyway." Jeb explained his plan.

"So all I want you to do is tag along behind me and not say a word, okay? Just watch and let me do the talking."

Howard made the trip without incident. By concentrating on his driving and the heavy weekend traffic, he'd suspended his fall and was more or less floating. When he turned into the gravel driveway leading up to the house and beyond it to the barn, however, he felt himself starting to drift downward again. It was the first time he'd been back since they'd moved.

He parked beside the sheriff's car and looked at the house and yard. Nothing much had changed. The house had been reroofed and resided, but it was the same shape as he remembered—only smaller, it seemed. The old barn was gone and a bright silver one stood in its place. The wet bark of the apple tree in back shone blackly against the blue sky to the southwest.

The front door opened and Sheriff Blunt came out. Howard also got out and they walked toward each other, then shook hands.

"Sorry to trouble you like this, Howard. I hope you had a pleasant drive."

Howard noticed that the sheriff had called him by his full name, and he appreciated it. "Not at all, Sheriff. I just hope I can be of some help to you." They were exactly the same age, but the sheriff looked younger and stronger. He had the outdoorsman's rugged frame, while Howard's round shoulders and soft hands testified to his job behind a desk.

"Call me Jeb. You still a reader? You must've read fifty books that year in literature class."

"No, not that many. But I still like reading. How about you?"

"Well, I'd read the newspaper once in a while if my arms could grow a little longer. Come on in for some coffee. Sorry for asking about your mother like that on the phone. I should've known better."

Howard nodded and followed him into the house. It smelled the same as he remembered, and that surprised him. They sat at the kitchen table after Jeb introduced him to his deputy and the Dlugoshes.

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He took the room in. The linoleum was different and the cupboards were painted green instead of the canary-yellow they used to be. His heart began beating fast. Had they found something? His hand shook as he drank his coffee—and then suddenly the second scene appeared.

He saw only his room this time, saw his mother come in silently and wake him gently. He heard her voice and suddenly he was in the scene, it was happening again as it had thirty years ago. He felt his mother's hand on his shoulder. It smelled of soap.

"Howard," she said. "You've got to get up. You've got to help me."

He didn't feel afraid, because he recognized that his mother was speaking from desperation, not from fear—he only had to help her, not save her. He followed her into the kitchen and there he saw his father on the floor, arms outstretched, blood soaking his clothes and the floor. Howard thought he should have looked more peaceful, but one leg was raised, one fist clenched. His eyes were still open and Howard stopped, wondering if he wouldn't suddenly jump up and shout at them.

He carefully went closer, staring at the eyes, looking for signs of life. He saw the dilated pupils, so big that he couldn't distinguish the brown of the irises. They were empty, he realized. It was as if they had held the scintilla of life in them, but it had burned itself out, leaving only those charred black holes behind. He reached out and closed the lids, then put his fingers on his father's lips, the only time in his life they would ever touch any part of him. He felt his mother shudder.

"Howard, you all right?" Jeb was standing beside him, looking concerned. "You look pale. Are you feeling okay?"

"Yes, I'm—I'm fine. Thank you. Maybe we should go on up." He stood, was grateful that his knees didn't fold. He was whistling down the darkness again, but he had a feeling the bottom was getting closer. He walked outside. He remembered everything so clearly, yet it was the first time since it had happened that he had ever consciously thought about it.

He had carried his father's legs, holding them by the pantlegs of the jeans. His mother had held the wrists. "Try not to drag him," she had said. They managed to carry him outside, where his mother had sent him for the wheelbarrow near the barn. They lifted his father in and took turns pushing it across the field, the other one

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carrying a lantern and two shovels, up to the trees at the top of the hill. It had taken them over two hours to dig the grave and refill it.

Howard retraced that path now, walking slowly up the hill, followed by the sheriff and his deputy. He had stayed away from the grave the remainder of the time they had lived there, always circling around it, yet knowing exactly where it was.

Black plastic covered it now. The wind had come up and it rustled the sheet. The other two men lifted the rocks holding it down and pulled it off.

"He was wearing a T-shirt and jeans, near as we can tell. And work shoes. The coroner said he was about five-eight, stocky build, aged around forty, black hair, dark complexion. Any ideas?" Jeb read from the missing-persons report filed by Howard's mother.

"No. Well, I—I—" and, stunned with grief, he fell to his knees and began crying. After his long fall, he had hit bottom, and the third of the three scenes he had kept hidden in himself for so long played itself out.

It was morning, and after he and his mother had scrubbed the kitchen and the wheelbarrow and he had slept a couple of hours she woke him. Her eyes were red and her light-brown hair was tied behind her head. She looked tired, but when she spoke he could feel her intensity.

"You've got to go to school; Howard. Just go and be your normal self. I did a terrible thing in the eyes of God and man last night and God will judge me for it. But in my eyes, it was justified. Our lives will be better now. But it is something only for us to know. You mustn't tell anyone, not now, not ever. You must keep it to yourself, lock it inside you and never let it out. Do you understand?"

He nodded and had ridden the yellow bus to school that morning with blistered hands and a strange feeling in his chest. The death of his father hovered there for a day or two before lodging itself somewhere out of sight. And he forgot about it.

And that had been the hole, he realized, the hole he'd been fearing, that had been threatening to swallow him. But now that he knew what it was, he was able to face it—had, in fact, gone headlong into it. For that was the only way to prevail over fear. Just as he had overcome his dread of the dark by standing alone in it, by becoming part of it, by grasping it with his essence, so now would he overcome

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the emptiness caused by his father's death. He had reached the bottom; it was time to climb out.

Howard stood up and wiped his face with the sleeve of his jacket. "That's my father," he said simply.

Jeb nodded. "Thanks, Howard. Do you want to go back?"

"Yes. I'm okay now."

Jeb saw Dan Adam's apple dancing a hornpipe. He had one hand on his gun and the other on his handcuffs. Jeb shook his head, frowning.

When they got back to the house, Jeb put his hand on Howard's shoulder. "Why don't you stay with me tonight? It's getting dark and the roads'll probably freeze over pretty soon. We've got an extra bedroom now that Timmy's at school."

"I've got chains, but—yeah, I'm kind of tired. You sure it's okay?"

"No problem. Why don't I drive us over in your truck and Dan here can take the sheriff's car back. Go warm it up while I call in."

Dan climbed into the car with Jeb. "You were right," he said, "he led us right to it! Aren't you going to arrest him?"

Jeb appeared to be thinking deeply. "The best thing to do right now is to make arrangements for the remains to be buried properly. Call Dr. Slater and tell him to get the body tomorrow morning and take it to his brother's funeral home. I'll take it from there."

"But, Jeb—it's a murder case! And I'm sure he knows more than he told us."

"Look, it could have been a million things—a tractor accident, suicide, who knows? There's no way to prove it was murder. We don't know what happened thirty years ago. Howard does, and he's reconciled to it. That's good enough for me." He smiled at Dan. "Okay, Deputy Weaver. Don't forget to call Dr. Slater. And try to pry your mind out of that box it's in and look at the big picture. This case is closed."

As he walked to the pickup, a squirt of pain in Jeb's tooth reminded him he was going to have to see Doc Haynes again soon. He hoped he wouldn't be too ornery a host for Howard.

The funeral was held on Wednesday. Howard drove down by himself and attended both the service in the funeral home and at the graveside. Jeb was there, along with a few others drawn out of curiosity. Howard had said practically nothing in answer to old man Willis's questions. No reporters from Springfield came, nor did any-

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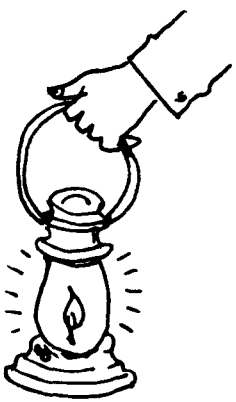
one from the wire services. No information, so no interest, so no news. The incident would fade quickly.

Jeb had had his tooth filled that morning and wasn't in his usual cheerful mood, but when Howard smiled at him warmly he couldn't help smiling back and feeling foolish for having been so cranky.

As the pastor read the service in a hoarse monotone interspersed by titanic blasts into a green handkerchief, Jeb listened and thought.

The coffin was lowered into the red clay. And life is a circle, he said to himself, dust to dust, from the darkness of the womb to the darkness of the earth. We stretch it, we shrink it, and we make holes in it. If we're very lucky, we fill them in before we get put in that final hole. He stepped forward with Howard, lifted some dirt from beside the grave, and dropped it onto the coffin.



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a *NEW* short story by

LORRAINE COLLINS

"Sheriff," Frank Johnson said on the phone, "I got a very peculiar situation here, one that requires a lot of—um—"

"Discretion," Charlie said. "Delicacy. I understand." In a dozen years of being sheriff he'd handled a few situations that called for more tact than guts.

"Charlie," Frank said very quietly, "if what I'm reading here is true, we might have a murderer loose in this county and I need to know what to do about it. Also, we've got somebody buried out in Pine Slope Cemetery that probably needs to be dug up . . ."

THE HAND OF GOD

by LORRAINE COLLINS

As far as I was concerned, it wasn't the hand of God at all; it was Dave Watson's backhoe that unexpectedly dislodged the cornerstone of the First United Brethren Church and scooped out onto the grass the square metal box that had been put into the cornerstone on May 9, 1945, when the church was dedicated. Dave was supposed to be replacing a sewer line that had become clogged with tree roots over the years, but he was never the best backhoe operator in the world, and, anyway, he was a bit under the weather that day. Drunk, to tell the truth.

There had been some discussion at the meeting of the Board of Trustees about whether Dave should get the contract for the job, but his was the lowest bid and they had already stretched the budget by hiring the new preacher from Iowa and paying his moving expenses. They needed to get the sewer problem solved before the new minister came out in July and the members of the congregation were

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like most other people in this little prairie town—respectable, God-fearing, sometimes stern and unbending. But practical. The best deal was to hire Dave Watson, so they did. Maybe after they did that, everything else was inevitable.

In due course, the backhoe rammed into the corner of the church, cut into two sandstone blocks, scooped out the metal box, ripped it open, and spilled the beans right there on the green and shady lawn of the church at the corner of Eighth and Willow.

Fortunately, Frank Johnson, a deacon of the church and chairman of the board, was there to see it all. He retrieved the box and carried it reverently into the church office. It was a great curiosity, that box, and he was interested in seeing what the congregation had put in it more than forty years before. So, of course, in rescuing the documents in the box Frank came upon the preacher's confession, and didn't know, right off, what to do with it. He finally did the only thing he could. He called me.

"Sheriff," he said, "I got a very peculiar situation here, one that requires a lot of—um—"

"Discretion," I said. "Delicacy. I understand." In a dozen years of being sheriff, I've handled a few situations that call for more tact than guts.

"Charlie," Frank said very quietly, "if what I'm reading here is true, we might have a murderer wandering loose in this county and I need to know what to do about it. Also, we've got somebody buried out in Pine Slope Cemetery that probably needs to be dug up."

Well, he got my attention. "After more than forty years, Frank? Would that do any good? Who is he?"

"Whoever he is, he isn't Billy Powers. And he was murdered. Which is why I called you. Can you come over sort of—quietly?"

I got into my blue-and-gold four-wheel drive outfit with the big star on the side and the spotlights and hailer on top, with the shotgun strapped along the side window. It's not the most inconspicuous outfit in town, but I didn't use the siren, and I drove down back alleys and side streets and came up to the church by the back door. Dave Watson was still digging up the front yard but he didn't notice me.

I was really curious to know how Billy Powers fitted in this situation. We all knew his story, even after all these years. It was sort of an object lesson for all of us, growing up out here on what used to be the frontier. Your conscience gets the best of you, they'd say;

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you can never get away from your duty and doing what's right, they'd say. Billy Powers tried it, and look what happened to him.

"The Reverend was the one who identified the body of Billy Powers back there in nineteen forty-five," Frank said. "What he says here—" he threw an envelope on the desk "—is that it wasn't Billy at all. He knew it. He lied and had the funeral for him and everything. Paid for it himself. There wasn't any family, you know. His grandmother raised him but she had died almost a year before. Reverend Goodwin said God already knew what he'd done, because He knows everything—and besides, he told Him. But if the hand of God ever dislodged this box, then the Reverend figured it was time for this community to know, too. So he wrote it down here."

"Dave Watson is a peculiar instrument of God," I said. "Are you sure we should count on divine intervention in this case?"

"There have been stranger means. Just read the Bible. I don't know why it might be important to find out all about this matter today, after all these years, but there must be a purpose in it all."

I looked at what the Reverend Richard Goodwin had written and put in the box, waiting for the hand of God to reveal at the appropriate time. He was a very sincere pacifist and there was a lot of bad feelings about pacifists during the war, and he understood that. A lot of people didn't hold with war—they were called conscientious objectors. Billy Powers was one, even though he let himself be drafted. But when he came home on leave, he didn't want to go back to the Army. He was more convinced than ever it was wrong.

The Reverend wrote, "Many people have gone to prison for their convictions, for many centuries, in many nations, but Billy's problem was even more complicated and serious."

I looked up at Frank as I turned a page. "It's got to be a girl," I said. "In those days, a serious problem always concerned a girl, right?"

Frank sighed. "That's right, Sheriff. Susan Blue. Seventeen years old and about three months' pregnant at the time."

I don't know. Desperate kids, asking the preacher for help—who's to say? When Billy didn't go back after his furlough, he was AWOL, and then a deserter. They came after him, of course, the FBI and the Army. And that was when the Reverend helped him disappear. That part didn't surprise me much. Reverend Goodwin struck a lot of people as being—well, different. Died of a heart attack while shoveling snow off the church sidewalk a long time ago—twenty-

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five years ago, maybe. Dying of a heart attack was the most conventional and ordinary thing he ever did.

"I thought it was a Godsend," the Reverend wrote. "I was coming back from Blakely's ranch where I baptized that poor baby before he died and the radiator boiled over, miles from town. I had been thinking about Billy and Susan as I drove, wondering how to help them. When I had to stop, I climbed a fence and went out onto the prairie and into the ravine with my water bucket. There I found the man. He was dead. I could do nothing for him. I didn't recognize him. A young man, with no wallet, no ration book, nothing to identify him. He had been shot in the head, and there was the gun, on the bank of the little stream. I prayed for his soul and then I thought that his death, his presence there, could do something for Billy Powers and Susan Blue. I prayed over it.

"Susan Blue's father would never let her marry Billy Powers if he went to prison, no matter what her condition. And I wanted to avert another tragedy, wanted to spare more sorrow. I prayed for guidance, but I know the decision was mine. God grants us free will."

The Reverend waited two days to see whether there were any inquiries about a missing man, and then he had Billy write a suicide note, saying he was going to shoot himself, and where to find him. Then the Reverend showed it to the sheriff—A. W. Ralston was sheriff then—and they went out and found the body. Coyotes had been at it by then and the sheriff just took the Reverend's word it was Billy. And they had the note for evidence.

"I do know," the Reverend wrote, "that this unfortunate creature of God I found lying dead in the ravine that day, a man known only to God, did not die by his own hand. In protecting Billy Powers, I am protecting this man's murderer."

I looked up at Frank. "Why is he calling this a murder instead of a suicide? That's more likely, it seems to me."

"I'll show you something in a minute. Just keep reading."

There wasn't much more to read. Reverend Goodwin didn't say exactly where Billy and Susan went, just that he married them, without a proper state license, so in the eyes of God they were married, and they left. Susan Blue wrote a note to her father saying that with Billy's death she was too unhappy to stay home and was going to California to have Billy's baby. That banished her from the family for good, and she knew it.

"Why doesn't he say where they went?" I complained to Frank.

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"Do you suppose he was afraid the hand of God would get here too quick, before the war was over?"

Frank sighed and leaned back in the chair behind the desk in the church office, but he didn't answer.

"Okay, Frank—first things first. What evidence is there that the man was murdered? Second, who was he? Third, who killed him, and is he still around?" I folded the papers and put them back in the envelope. "Forty years and more ago, Frank. Are you sure we should be messing with it? Everybody involved is probably dead by now, or on Social Security."

"Reverend Goodwin sincerely believed that if God had a purpose in revealing this to us he would, Charlie." Frank leaned forward across the desk. He looked real earnest, real serious about it. "It has been revealed. So I'd appreciate it if you would just make a few inquiries and see what you come up with. When you find the truth, we'll know why you found it."

I appreciated the vote of confidence, that I might actually find the truth, but I wasn't sure where to start. "Any ideas, Frank? Besides digging up the body, which I have no inclination to do."

He reached into a drawer and took out a small canvas bag and handed it to me. The bag was tied with a piece of rawhide. It was an old bank-deposit bag for the First State Bank, which had long since been consolidated into something else. "I haven't looked in this because the label on it says it's for the sheriff. I think maybe Reverend Goodwin started doing your work for you."

He was right there. I waited until I was back in my office and had the door shut before I opened it and spread the contents out on my desk. Among other things, there was a sketch of the so-called murder scene, a little map, and another letter addressed to the sheriff. There were also three shell casings. One seemed to be from the .22 revolver that was found by the body, but the other two were different. Very different. Eleven millimeter. I hardly ever see any of those. That would mean a foreign gun, maybe a German Luger. In 1945? For a minute there, I started thinking of spy stories.

The map showed how the man had apparently been shot right at the banks of the creek, where the .22 was dropped, and had crawled farther up, maybe trying to get away. The Reverend wrote that there was a lot of evidence of blood and marks in the dirt. He hadn't died right away, but whoever shot him caught up with him and shot him again.

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The Reverend seemed a very efficient guy to me—rearranging a murder scene to fit a suicide, planting the .22 next to the body, picking up the eleven-millimeter casings. There was no such thing as an autopsy in this little town back in 1945. No problem about the size of the wound—especially after the body was left out on the prairie for a couple of days.

There was one other item in the bag. It looked to be a class ring, a man's ring with a pretty good-size stone in it, kind of fancy for around here. Initials inside—E.W. But from what school? Elderton High 1943. Where would that be? There wasn't a town named Elderton in the whole state that I knew of. It wasn't a whole lot to go on. But nothing ventured—

I called home and asked Marie to check our National Geographic Atlas for any town anywhere named Elderton. "What you up to now?" she said, but didn't wait for the answer. "Just a minute, I'll look in the index."

She came up with two—one clear down in Florida and one up in North Dakota. "Spareribs for supper," she said. "So don't have too big a lunch."

I tried the North Dakota town first, since it was the closer one. When the telex went out to Elderton asking for information on any 1943 male graduate with initials E.W., I had another idea and sent an inquiry to the FBI. What did they have on an Army deserter named William Powers, last seen here in 1945? I thought I might as well find out.

I was staring at the county map tacked to my office wall when Wally came in with the telex from Elderton, North Dakota, in his hand. "There are two of them, Charlie. Two men, plus an Elizabeth Wilson who died in 1969 when her car stalled on a train track. There's Edgar Watts, present whereabouts unknown, and Eldon Williams, a physician residing in Bismarck." He looked closely at me as he handed me the telex, waiting to see if I was going to tell him what this was all about.

"Get on the phone and tell them we want to know everything they've got on Edgar Watts—when he was last seen, where he went after graduation, where his family is, the works." While Wally went to do that, I still sat there staring at the county map, thinking about Reverend Goodwin and wondering whether Dave Watson's backhoe was really the hand of God.

Then I thought about what the Reverend was doing when he found the body. He was driving along, worrying about Billy and Susan,

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and he was trying to "avert another tragedy." Another one. Another tragedy. What was the first one? He was on his way home from the Blakelys' ranch, where he had baptized a baby before it died. That must be it. The death of Blakely's baby was a tragedy, but—

I was seven years old in 1945 and my big brother wasn't around any more to give me hints about local scandals. I don't suppose there were very many, and what there were didn't involve money or drugs like they tended to today. There was only one scandalous thing in those days. Sex.

I faintly remembered something about the Blakely girl, but the Billy Powers suicide was a lot more impressive—it was all we talked about for a while. Made us forget everything else. But—what about the Blakely baby? Who would be having a baby in 1945? I bet Mrs. Blakely was forty-five or even fifty years old then. She seemed ancient to me, whenever I saw her. About how I look today, I suppose, to a seven-year-old kid.

A ranch family, forty miles from town, on a dirt road in those days, not even gravel. We didn't know much about the Blakelys. What was the girl's name? She came in from the country school after the eighth grade and boarded with some town family during the week, didn't she? Blakely. *Alberta* Blakely, that was it. I hadn't seen or thought of her in years and years. Joshua Blakely's daughter, Alberta. In my brother's class, maybe. Didn't stay very long.

There was a joke. I could hear my brother's voice telling that joke about Alberta. I can hear him sometimes inside my head, just as clear as a bell, just as if he hadn't died eighteen days after D-Day in some little town in France, about as big as this town. I visited it once, and the big American cemetery in Normandy.

I grabbed my hat and told Wally I was heading out toward the Blakely ranch. But first I stopped in at the County Recorder's office on the way out. They never got computerized there, but Hazel Schmidt had worked there for about as long as I'd been on earth. She either knew everything, or knew where to find it.

The road out toward Blakelys' was paved most of the way by now and I was a good thirty miles out by the time Wally's call came through on my radio. I made good time the rest of the way, too, because it was a county gravel road right up to the cattle gate where the ranch property began. Still, it was still a pretty isolated place. The Blakelys had always been sheep people, and that means a big acreage—sheep scattered all over the sagebrush for miles, trying to find a little grass. Always used to have a sheep herder in the old

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days, living in a sheep wagon out on the prairie. Times have changed. No such thing as a sheep herder now. I wondered who helped Josh junior keep track of the flock these days. No family, and no airplane like some ranchers had.

Josh junior had been running the place for thirty, forty years. His dad had a stroke a long time ago, which was one thing Hazel Schmidt remembered when I asked her a little bit about the Blakelys. Josh junior had an agricultural deferment during the war, on account of his dad not being able to run the ranch alone. His dad was kind of embarrassed about it, because he had been in World War I himself.

"Well, Sheriff, you're a long ways from home." Josh came out of his big machine shed, wiping his hands on a greasy rag. Working on a tractor or something, probably. A big man, six foot or more. Broad-shouldered, strong, not smiling, looking me over. "It ain't election time again, is it? Mostly that's when I see county officials." Still not smiling.

"I'm not so sure you even see me then, Josh. Don't get out here much, unless there's a call to come by."

He glanced toward the house. "Somebody call you now? Don't think I did."

"No, no call, Josh. Just thought I'd stop and visit with—with Alberta for a minute."

I wasn't even sure she was there. It's just that she wasn't anywhere else that I knew of. Didn't ever graduate from high school, didn't ever get a job anywhere, didn't ever get married. Didn't ever vote, even. Didn't seem to have died. The only Blakelys that had died were old Josh and his wife—and the little baby boy, back in 1945. He was born prematurely out here on the ranch and died. Hazel Schmidt showed me the death certificate. It said the baby was born to Mrs. Blakely, who was fifty-two years old. "I didn't believe it at the time," Hazel said. They recorded the birth and death, but he was buried out here on the ranch.

"Alberta's not much for visiting. She's not—too smart, you know. Knows enough to keep house for me, but that's about all. Not much for visiting."

"Well, I have a question to ask her. If it's not too much trouble."

"A question!" He gave a little snort of laughter. "What kind of question? She don't know nothing. Never did, never will."

"I guess I know Alberta is—a bit slow. But she gets along okay, doesn't she? Manages for herself? I'd just like to see her a minute. In the house?"

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"I'm in charge of Alberta. You can talk to me."

I sure didn't like the way this conversation was going. I was beginning to think I'd have to get a warrant, but Alberta came out of the house then. Stood as shy as a little girl, hanging onto the post on the front porch, but she had grey hair. Had on a house dress. I hadn't seen a woman in a house dress for something like thirty years, didn't even know they made them any more—cotton dresses with no particular shape, pockets in front, rickrack. My God, it must have been her mother's dress.

I walked over to her and smiled. "Alberta, you're looking mighty fine today. I'm Charlie Jones. Don't know if you remember me. My brother Bob you might remember. He was about your age, I think."

She smiled, but didn't say anything. She always did have a pretty smile. I remembered it. Eyes as big as saucers, watching me. She used to be a pretty girl, I remembered.

I tried not to wonder what Josh was doing behind my back as I pulled the class ring out of my pocket and held it out toward Alberta. "I thought maybe this belonged to a friend of yours a long time ago. Name of Edgar Watts, I believe it was. You called him Ed? Eddie?"

For a minute I thought she was going to faint. But then she laughed. Her face was shining, radiant. She looked right over my shoulder at Josh standing there, and said, "See, Josh? I told you he'd come! I told you!"

I turned around to look at Josh, going for broke. "You still got the old eleven-millimeter Luger, Josh? I bet your dad brought that back from the First War, didn't he?"

Color drained out of his face and he sagged against the porch railing. "My God—my God—"

Alberta was still smiling, turning the ring over and over in her hand. "He's always been sweet on me, always. And now he's coming back! I won't have to go away now, will I, Josh? I won't have to go!" She grabbed hold of my hand. "Oh, thank you! Thank you!" Tears were streaming down her face.

"My God," Josh said. "My God!"

I could only nod my head. "Could be."

Frank Johnson was really impressed when I told him how I tracked everything down, even if it was mostly computers and telexes that did the job. That's how we work these days, a lot different from 1945. Except for Hazel Schmidt in the County Recorder's office.

"The Reverend took the ring off the body and said he figured it

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would help, if the time came. It sure did. That Watts boy got a deferment as an agricultural laborer and came out here to work. He—well, he got Alberta in trouble, as they used to say. He was herding sheep for the Blakelys and Alberta was around. So. Josh junior decided he had to avenge the family honor or some damned thing. It was a scene right out of a western movie, I guess. Draw and shoot. Silly damned boys shooting at each other instead of at the Nazis."

"What are you going to do about it, Charlie?"

"Nothing. So long as Josh lets Alberta stay out there where she wants to. Can you believe it? After all these years, he decided to sell or lease the ranch and go to California. Why does everybody want to go to California? He was going to send her to some home someplace, just dump her off. After all those years of neglect, and not doing one damned thing for her. She's happy there. She functions okay there. If he wants to go, okay, but he has to find somebody to look after Alberta. Hell, he's made a mint off of that place over the years. Never gave her a thing. I told him, 'Josh, you just think of me as Alberta's guardian angel from now on. She's half owner of this place, you know. I'll be coming out to visit now and then—maybe bring Marie and a picnic. Maybe Marie will take Alberta on a shopping spree, get her hair done. Get her some new clothes.' "

Frank was grinning. "So—just in time, eh? Guardian angel, eh? Well!" I sat still, not admitting a thing. "What about Billy Powers?"

"Now, that's *really* something. He died in Mexico twenty years ago. Still a young man. The record was set straight then, but nobody bothered to tell us. His family carries on his work there, though. They've been doing a lot of good for years. Susan and three kids. I called her up and talked to her."

"No kidding?"

"She was real interested in hearing about things back here. Thought she'd send a little money back, to help put in a new cornerstone for the church. Seemed to think that would be a good idea, putting everything back together. A memorial for Reverend Goodwin."

"What did you say she's doing down there?"

"She and the kids, they run a mission. If I told you the name of it, you wouldn't believe me."

Frank raised his eyebrows. "El Mano de—?"

"You got it, Frank. Dios."

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a *NEW* short story by

JULIAN SYMONS

Feeling that he should speak, the young American said, "That was in nineteen forty-eight."

"I believe so." Lady X's small eyes were sharp within their folds of skin. "I hope you do not expect dates and hours. This is a mystery without a solution. I am telling you what happened, no more."

In Twentieth Century Crime and Mystery Writers, *Julian Symons comments: "The thing that absorbs me most in our age is the violence behind the respectable faces, the civil servant planning how to kill Jews most efficiently, the judge speaking with passion about the need for capital punishment, the quiet obedient boy who kills for fun. These are extreme cases, but if you want to show the violence that lives behind the bland faces most of us present to the world, what better vehicle can you have than the crime novel?" And the crime story. Even the light one. Especially the light one . . .?*

THE BORGIA HEIRLOOM

by JULIAN SYMONS

"And now," Lady X said, "you may ask your questions."

The young man repeated, perhaps for the sixth time, that it was very good of her to receive him, and give him lunch, and talk to him. At that, she merely inclined her head, told the maid that they would take coffee in the drawing room, and led the way there. She was very old, her skin the color of parchment, her hands liver-spotted, thickly veined, the nails yellow and horny. Several rings—a

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large diamond, a sapphire-and-ruby cluster, a huge emerald—looked incongruous on them.

"It's not exactly questions." The young man was American, his fair hair cut close to the head, his eyes round and innocent, his manner earnest. "I'm doing this book on great unsolved British cases, they're so much subtler than our crude shootouts, and I'm trying to get accounts from people who actually knew the background and the characters. Official accounts don't really bring them to life."

"I can do that for you." Her laugh was a raven's caw, but she shook her head when, with a tentative air, he produced a notebook. "Oh, no—no. Notebooks are for reporters, my dear young man. I understand you to be a real writer."

He put away the notebook. He had, after all, a good memory.

"The place, as you know, was Gratchen Manor, where we are now—the home of my husband's family for more than a century. It is a pleasant place, one with an ambience that impresses itself on the characters of those who live in it. Do you understand me?"

The young American nodded. In truth, he was overawed by the great house, the portraits of grim-faced ancestors along the walls, the intimidating size of the dining room in which the two of them had eaten at one end of the long table, and of this drawing room with its grand piano, alcoves containing what was no doubt immensely valuable porcelain, great windows looking onto a terrace from which steps led down to what seemed acres of lawn. It seemed to him wrong that families should live in such large houses—and now not even a family, but one old woman and her housekeeper, plus a servant or two.

"This house and this English countryside formed the character of my husband, Tom, and our son Charlie. You would have had to know them to understand them. Tom—Sir Thomas—went to London two or three days each week, he was a director of this company and vice-chairman of that, but his heart was here at Gratchen. He took part in every local event, thought of himself as the squire, as his father and grandfather had been before him, employed half the people in the village, felt responsible for their moral welfare. A strange thing that, in this modern world, but it was so."

The young man nodded. He had heard different tales in the village, where Sir Thomas was resented as a man who poked his nose into matters that did not concern him.

"And Charlie, Charlie was perfect. Everybody loved him." She

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indicated a portrait, head and shoulders, of a weakly handsome young man in officer's uniform. "I prayed for him to come through the war unharmed, and my prayers were answered. Then all I wanted was for him to marry the right girl and make this house their home. That will sound old-fashioned, too, I'm sure."

Charlie's fellow officers had said he was pleasant enough, but thick as two blocks. Feeling that he should speak, the young American said, "That was in nineteen forty-eight."

"I believe so." Lady X's small eyes were sharp within their folds of skin. "I hope you do not expect dates and hours. This is a mystery without a solution. I am telling you what happened, no more.

"In the autumn, Charlie became engaged to Susan Baybridge. They had known each other from childhood, her father was a barrister, it was a suitable match in every way." Lady X rose arthritically, took a silver-framed photograph from the top of the grand piano, and showed it to the young man. "That was Susan at the time."

The photograph showed a rather plain, heavy-featured girl with a determined chin. "Charlie was involved in some kind of commercial activity in London, which his father seemed to think necessary. He came back here, of course, at weekends. You may imagine my incredulity when he arrived one weekend in company with a young woman and told us he intended to break his engagement with Susan and marry this—this woman. Her name was Deirdre O'Connor and she was alleged to be a fashion model. It was obvious to me at once that she was out for what she could get and had no feeling for Charlie. It was found later that she had granted her favors to half a dozen young men.

"I thought her an entirely unsuitable wife for Charlie, and told him so, and I told him also that his treatment of Susan was disgraceful. I was not surprised that when at last he told her that he wished to break off their engagement, there was a violent quarrel. In front of the servants."

In front of the servants, he thought. It was certainly a different world. As if reading his thoughts, she said, "It was another world we lived in here at Gratchen. And a better one.

"In the New Year, we gave a dinner party. Of course we invited Susan. She did some job in a scientific laboratory and we invited the director of the place, a tiresome man named Cleggit. There were other friends, including our local medical man, Dr. MacFarlane—a dozen altogether. Then, quite unexpectedly, Charlie came down, the

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woman with him. Susan had to meet the woman—it was most unpleasant for her."

"Your son said he told you he was coming down and you must have forgotten."

"I forget nothing." Her gaze was withering. "May I continue? Thank you. —We ate simple English food, which, even in those days of rationing, was not denied to us at Gratchen. A clear soup made with stock, roast beef accompanied by the usual vegetables, an apple charlotte. It was not a happy meal. Tom was already sick with the kidney disease from which he died six months later, Susan hardly spoke, the dreadful Deirdre talked too much and too loudly, and Charlie was obviously besotted by her. After dinner we came in here, and it was then that Deirdre behaved as if drunk or drugged. She staggered about, almost fell over when sitting down in a chair, a disgusting exhibition. Then she collapsed and was taken to lie down, Dr. MacFarlane attending her. He agreed with me that she had taken an overdose of drugs, and when we questioned Charlie he admitted that she used both cocaine and heroin. She was taken ill at nine-thirty. Just after midnight, she died."

"But drugs didn't cause her death."

"Dr. MacFarlane thought so at the time."

"But Cleggit knew better. His pharmaceutical knowledge led him to suspect an alkaloid poison. He made sure that the wine glasses and coffee cups were preserved, not washed up."

"Cleggit was a busybody, a troublemaker."

"And you know what was found in one coffee cup. Coniine, the drug derived from *conium maculatum*, the spotted hemlock. The poison Socrates took, the drug Keats said induced a drowsy numbness, the drug of which even a few drops may be a fatal dose. But how was it administered? That was what the police could never establish. It must have been from some kind of phial, but none was found. Your son poured the coffee, you added sugar, but none of the guests noticed anything unusual, and in any case Deirdre O'Connor took no sugar."

The maid came in with a tray containing a coffee pot, two cups, a milk jug, and a bowl of sugar cubes. The young man continued. "Of course, there were suspects. Susan had reason enough to hate Deirdre. Your son might have found out about her other men friends. It was even suggested that your husband, knowing himself under sentence of death, might have been responsible."

"That was ridiculous. If Cleggit had not been such a busybody, Dr.

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MacFarlane would have signed a death certificate. As it was, the affair broke up the family. Charlie went out to Australia, married a girl there, died five years ago without an heir. I am quite alone now."

The young man's eyes were bright. He lowered his voice, almost whispered, as he said, "You arranged the dinner party, you knew your son was coming, you invited Dr MacFarlane. I think you did it."

She seemed not to have heard him, poured the coffee into the two cups. "It was all so long ago. Do you take milk?"

"What? Oh, no, thank you."

"Sugar?"

"No sugar." He leaned forward. "Won't you tell me, now that it can do no harm, just for my satisfaction as an amateur criminologist, how you did it?"

The little eyes in the wrinkled face were amused, contemptuous. "You are an impertinent young man. I said I was telling you a story to which there is no solution." She passed him the coffee cup, then held up her veined, spotted hand with the bright rings on it. "Would you believe that my hands were once admired? Nowadays people only look at the rings. The emerald is an heirloom, said to have belonged to a Borgia."

What followed was so quick that if she had not drawn attention to her hand he would not have seen it. From the center of the great emerald ring a tiny stream of liquid shot into her cup. She gave her raven caw at his shocked, startled face and said, "Liquid saccharin."

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In recent years Mrs. Zalesny had started drinking. More than one story had circulated through town about people who had stumbled across her while she was sleeping it off on the bare ground . . .

FATHER SAYS

by ROBERT HENSON

Letter-writing was my mother's job but she always included a paragraph beginning "Your father says to tell you . . ." What followed was never anything that really required name credit ("Helen Klinger had a baby boy—she remembers you from high school—her maiden name was Sparks") but my mother seemed to feel that these items lent prestige to her letters. At least they were accurate. She herself sometimes had to pursue a maiden name, an occupation, a current address through several letters before she got it straight. My father, however, would have attended Helen Klinger all through her pregnancy and delivery, he would not report that she'd had a girl when she'd had a boy, nor that her maiden name was Sprague when it was Sparks. He was a doctor, he kept his facts straight.

When he retired from all but a minimum practice, he still left the correspondence to my mother, but I began to notice a change in the "father says" items. Instead of being confined to briskly factual glimpses of my generation getting married, having children, gathering possessions, they dwelt increasingly on acts of violence, fraud, and malice. The news didn't always (or even usually) concern people I knew, for as it grew more sensational it also grew more impersonal—though my father tried to compensate for the anonymous someones by naming familiar and exact locales: "Your father says to tell you that someone murdered a woman in the basement of the Walcott Grain Bldg where he had his first office—her boy friend is being held—he is supposed to be a narcotics addict"—"Someone tied a man to a chair in the old Shull house half a mile north of where Grandpa used to live, poured gasoline on him, and set him on

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fire—he was supposed to be mixed up in gambling and prostitution . . ."

These gargoyles in the landscape of my mother's letters were not to her liking. The supposeds were something new, too—editing. She no longer trusted my father's facts. The real trouble, she hinted, was that he didn't have anything to do after he'd gone to his office for an hour in the morning, and so he hung around the drugstore across from the hospital gossiping with his cronies. Crape-hangers, the lot of them. She still found much to report on the remodeling of Montgomery Ward's or the death, by natural causes, of Mr. Watts (or Mr. Worth), my high-school history teacher.

Real or supposed, the new degeneracy reached a gruesome climax early in the second summer of my father's retirement. No anonymity this time. The victim was Hugh Auburn. But my mother had apparently rebelled at last against being the channel of information. I could picture her handing the pen across the table and saying, "If you want him to know *that* you'll have to tell him yourself," because the P.S. was in his neat hand: "You remember Hugh Auburn—in your class in high school—lawyer now—his wife cut his tallywhacker off. Love, Your Dad."

"What in the world is a tallywhacker?" my wife wondered, though she suspected. She does all our letter-writing, too, and we decided to try to find out more. We'd both known Hugh and the girl he married. "Shall I say tallywhacker?" she asked, pen hovering. "It seems so—unmedical."

"Maybe he wanted to suit the word to the deed."

"I don't believe it," she said. "The deed, I mean. Do you?"

My mother's reply, brief and reluctant, clouded the issue but didn't encourage further inquiry. "It was supposed to have happened over at Pawhuska, not here. But they say now that she shot Hugh, not the other. The police aren't pressing charges, so it was probably just an accident. You know how your father exaggerates."

There was no "father says" in the letter.

In August, I flew to Dallas on business and arranged to stop off in Oklahoma on the way back for a few days' visit. My father met me at the Tulsa airport. He was alone. My mother wouldn't drive with him any more because of his eyesight. He didn't deny that it had grown poorer but maintained that he got along well enough except at night.

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"Family couldn't come with you," he asked, or stated.

"No, Dad, but Carol and the children send their love."

"You should have parked them here while you were in Dallas."

"You've forgotten how complicated these things are, Grandpa."

"Well, it's not me. It's your mother. She's the one that thinks you just stick a baby under each arm and start out."

My mother said that it was really Carol's sister who was disappointed. Laverne had never married. She always looked forward to seeing her nieces and nephews. "Which is more than her nieces and nephews can say," I remarked as the phone was put in my hand so that I would call Laverne immediately. Laverne, like her mother before her, was an intense fundamentalist. Summertime to her was outdoor revival time—sanctification, justification, and glorification on wooden benches under strings of bare bulbs—though she had to go farther and farther into the country every year to find what she was looking for. The children hardly thought that her ice-cream cones were worth it. "There's no use asking Laverne about Hugh," Carol said, just before I left. "She'd just end up praying for you—and me." Carol, fortunately, took after her late father.

We had agreed, however, that I was to find out what had really happened, so I asked about Hugh the next morning as my father and I were finishing breakfast on the back porch. My mother had just set out a fresh pot of coffee. "I'll be in the kitchen when this conversation is finished," she said.

"Listening to every word," my father added.

"I stopped listening to gossip years ago," she retorted without heat, and he replied amiably, "No woman ever stops listening to gossip."

Obviously they had been through this before, and so she appealed to me: "Your father listens to the same things I used to hear regular as a clock twenty and thirty years ago."

He said, "Your mother's turned into a regular ostrich. What she heard thirty years ago was watermelon-stealing, minister's son getting drunk. Not what we have today. Did you hear about those teenage boys that jumped an old man in the nine-hundred block of Braid Street? Put him in the hospital. Why? For excitement. Think of that! This town has changed, the people in it have changed."

"Wouldn't you think a doctor would know better?"

"In all my years of practice I never once treated a man that'd had his—"

"No," she said, "and you didn't treat Hugh Auburn, either."

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My father shook his head as she disappeared into the kitchen with her last word, but was nevertheless a trifle defensive. "It happened over in Pawhuska, you know."

"Just how first-hand is this story, Dad?"

"It came from a nurse at the Pawhuska hospital. She said Hugh was out cold when they brought him in. Some kind of knockout drops. His wife had used a kitchen knife on him."

"Good God!"

"Then she salted the wound down like you would a steer, and called the ambulance. Cool as a cucumber. She was raised on a ranch, you know. Lucky in a way, otherwise he'd have bled to death. She didn't want to go that far."

"Why, Dad, Jennie wasn't raised on a ranch. Carol and I both knew her. Her father—"

"This wasn't Jennie. It was his second wife. Jennie divorced him two or three years ago."

"I wrote you that!" my mother called plaintively.

My father nodded eloquently toward the kitchen. "He gave the second wife the same trouble he gave Jennie. Don't know whether you're aware of the fact, but Hugh's been a great trifler."

I didn't know. I remembered that in high school the girls had considered Hugh "cute," but whatever that meant it hadn't earned him any great reputation as a girl chaser. At the state university, where I saw him very seldom, his chief distinction had been the minor one of being captain of the golf team. He married Jennie while he was in law school. She had worked to help put him through.

"What have they done to the wife?" I asked.

"Well, she was in a mental hospital for observation—"

"She's no more in a mental hospital than you are!" my mother called. "She and Hugh are living in Pawhuska this very minute, only they've moved out to her father's ranch."

"I said *was*, not *is*. Then they took her back to the county jail and finally released her because Hugh wouldn't press charges. He said she'd shot him. Said it was an accident."

"Why would he say that—I mean, if it wasn't true?"

"Well, wouldn't you? *Something* happened—no one disputes that. Would you rather people'd look at you and think—" He shrugged. He had a point.

"Either way, I sure as hell wouldn't go back to the woman. That's the incredible part."

"Why? How much does anyone know about their relationship?

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Maybe Hugh feels he deserves to be punished—in that very way. Or maybe he never wanted to be a man in the first place. They say his wife wore the pants in the family."

"Listen to the psychologist!" my mother called.

"She can't stand it another minute," my father grumbled just before she pushed open the screen. "Well, let him hear your version."

"My version," she said, "is old as the hills. They had a quarrel that'd been building up a long time and she finally cleared the air."

"With a *knife*?"

"A gun."

"A gun, then."

"Listen, do you think Hugh's wife is the first woman around here that ever took a gun to her husband—I don't mean intending to shoot him but just to scare him? I could name you half a dozen, starting with Della Bennett thirty years ago."

"An Indian," my father said.

"She was half Indian—not that that has anything to do with it. When Hugh says the gun went off by accident, I believe him. He loves her, he doesn't want to get her into trouble. I think he means to do better from now on."

"As long as women have tongues they won't need guns," my father muttered.

Later, when he'd gone to his office, my mother said that she hated for me to see him like this, getting senile. "Oh, I know he'll say the same thing about me. He's always telling me I live in the past and want things to be like they were fifty years ago. But there's one thing I do know something about, and that's gossip. Your father doesn't. That business with the knife is pure gossip."

"What makes you think so?"

"Well, let me ask you a question. It's not a very nice one, and I don't expect an answer."

"Don't be shy."

"Well, then, if she was using a knife, why didn't she—why did she use it the way she did?"

I started to say, "Why didn't she stab him?" but she shook her head. "Castrate him, you mean?"

"Yes." She looked as if she had made a clear point, but I didn't get it. "I mean," she said firmly, "that's how you know it's gossip, though the style may have changed a little. It's got that touch of dirt in it."

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"Isn't that a pretty fine distinction to have to make?"

"Maybe—but you think it over. After all, she *is* a rancher's daughter."

I had to postpone discriminating between touch of dirt and ring of truth for the moment, because just then Lyda Zalesny knocked at the back door. We were in the kitchen—my mother was working at the sink—but neither of us heard Lyda come up on the porch. My mother started guiltily at her knock and shot me a glance which asked how long *she'd* been there. I could see her through the screen, big-boned, spare, with shiny reddish skin and slightly bulging blue eyes, still looking "country" though for years she'd been a legal stenographer.

"Goodness, Lyda," my mother cried, "why don't you use the front door?"

"Because you're always in the kitchen," Lyda replied stolidly as she let herself in.

If she was surprised to see me, she didn't show it. But demonstrativeness was the last thing I'd have expected from Lyda Zalesny, anyway. In high school none of us had ever known whether she was shy, resentful, or merely indifferent. We attributed her stoic reserve to her background—Czech, Catholic, laborious; it had made her uninterestingly different.

She'd come by, she said, with a message from her mother. Wasps were stinging the plums and pears bad this year—it was the dry weather. "Mama says if you want to put anything up, you'd better come out right away."

"Oh, Lyda, I can't go out there in this heat! and with him here such a short time."

"Your mother's just like mine," Lyda said, shifting her marble eyes to me. "She can't stand to see things go to waste."

My mother protested. A few jars of this, a few jars of that—a lot of waste *that* prevented! "Your mama ought to get someone to pick on shares. Every year I tell her, 'Who do I have to can for? It's not worth the time and trouble.' Same with her pecans in the fall. How many can I use? I'd be better off buying them at the store."

"Mama won't touch store-bought plums or pears," Lyda said impassively. "She always waits for what your mother sends."

"Oh," my mother said helplessly, "I'll bet she throws what I send her right out the door. She was born knowing more about canning than I could ever learn."

I mentioned that I could still remember Mrs. Zalesny's cellar, the

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floor under several inches of water straddled by damp planks, the walls a rainbow of fruits and vegetables in shiny glass jars.

"I don't know how she did it," my mother sighed—predictably. How often I'd heard that remark when I was growing up and Mrs. Zalesny owned the farm next to my grandfather's. She was a widow with no sons, only this one daughter, yet she managed to keep going. No one knew how she did it. There had to be some limit to sheer toil.

My grandparents, like everyone else, harbored mixed feelings about her, sometimes holding her up as an example of early-to-bed early-to-rise virtue, at other times giving the impression that her laboriousness had something too old-world about it, something peasant instead of farmer. One spring her horse died and she hitched herself to the plow. Lyda guided. My grandfather waited a day, of course, then offered the loan of his horse. She was touchingly grateful, for though she would never ask for help she was not too proud to accept it. Long after my grandfather died, she continued to speak of him as a saint because of the many times he'd acted as a true neighbor; and long after he died, she faithfully sent tributes of peaches, pickles, catsup, apple sauce—first to my grandmother, later to my mother and father. Except that somewhere along the line, as it now appeared, she had switched to offering her produce on a do-it-yourself basis.

My mother was plainly torn between not wanting to be bothered and not wanting to hurt Mrs. Zalesny's feelings, so I volunteered to go in her place. I added that I was curious, anyway, to see how things looked out where Grandpa used to live. Lyda's eyes shifted to the window. "Mama doesn't live out that way any more."

"I wrote you that," my mother said fretfully. "She sold to the same developer that bought Grandpa's place."

"I'd forgotten."

"It's all houses now," said Lyda.

"You could never find the new place by yourself."

For a moment Lyda might have given up, but then she came back with curious determination: "I can get off early this afternoon and drive you out."

"Oh, Lyda," my mother sighed, "that's so much trouble."

Nevertheless, in mid-afternoon we set out in Lyda's blue Pontiac through the dry shimmering heat. My father had also declined to go with us. He had come home at one, full of the news that Hugh

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Auburn was in town. No one knew why. He had been seen going into Seward's Hardware. He and Tom Seward, Jr., who now ran the store, had been golf buddies before Hugh moved, but no one supposed that he was in town for a round of golf. Before my father followed my mother into the bedroom for a nap, I asked him the rancher's-daughter question. It only made him snort. Hugh's wife had done what a *woman* would do, rancher's daughter or school librarian. Hugh's pleasure was what she was after, not his potency.

"We still have plenty of *those*," Lyda remarked. She meant locusts. From the chinaberry trees around a farmhouse south of town, their inland surf rose shrilling, broke, and subsided on an answering swell from another farm. "Remember how we used to make teams out of their shells and hitch them to matchbox wagons?"

I counted heads in the dusty circle under my grandfather's chinaberry trees: my sister, Willis and Ray Newhouse, Ruth Courtney—but no Lyda. Her mother had always kept her too busy. Was she revising instead of remembering? Was I?

We left pavement for gravel, gravel for hard red clay, deeply rutted. Dry red dust covered the leaves of the scrub-oak trees and made the petals of the coropsis that overflowed the ditches look more stridently yellow.

"Does your mother live alone out here?"

"All alone. I wanted her to move in with me but she took her money and bought this place instead. You know how she is when she makes up her mind. She likes the country, that's all."

"She's like my father—retired but keeps his office open an hour a day."

We jolted breathtakingly from one rut to another. "You can see why I don't come out here very often," she said grimly as we turned without warning into the front yard of an unpainted four-room house. She ignored a faint driveway and pulled to a stop directly in front of a small porch flanked by lilac and rose bushes. The door stood wide open. I could see straight through the house and out a back window to a distant ridge knotted with scrub oak.

Lyda sat for a moment as if resting, her hands on the wheel, her face turned to catch a breeze. She hadn't honked, she didn't seem to expect anyone to come running out. And, in fact, she was thinking about my father and preparing an unexpected question. But first she asked, "Does he still take patients?"

"Dad? Oh, he sees a few old steadies who won't go to anyone else until he dies. They even tell him so."

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"That's a compliment."

"Yes, in a way. There aren't many of them left, though. He doesn't take any new ones."

"I was just wondering if he knows whether the hospital plans to take Jennie Auburn back."

She turned her bulging eyes in my direction without really looking at me. She seldom felt surprise herself and didn't like to create it in others. I was to understand, not that she had been eavesdropping at our back door but only that she had overheard the topic of conversation.

"He hasn't mentioned it," I said. "Why?"

"Well, she worked there for a while after she divorced Hugh. Receptionist. Then she quit and went away—to Denver, I think. She only came back this spring. Now she's reapplied for her old job, so I hear."

Something in her voice made me ask, "Why wouldn't they take her back if they needed someone?"

"Well, she's the one who started that rumor about Hugh—I guess you know which rumor I mean."

"What!"

"Personally," she said with telling flatness, "I think she ought to be run out of town. There's no telling where she is," meaning, in a rush, her mother, not Jennie. "She'll know we're here when she sees the car."

I stopped her as she pushed the car door open. "Do you know Hugh's second wife?"

"No. I just feel sorry for Hugh, that's all. He couldn't keep a stenographer, Jennie was so jealous."

It became more and more difficult to picture Lyda as a legal stenographer—much less as one with professional pique—as she led the way to the rear of the house and began to root around for some bushel baskets in a lean-to shed. Her face turned scarlet in the heat, her skin shone with sweat, yet she seemed quite at home. We stopped in the kitchen for a moment. It was too bare to be anything but neat—a man's denim jacket tossed over the back of a chair managed to be conspicuous. Lyda hung it on a nail under a shelf. "The hired man from the next place over must be here. He stops in every now and then to give Mama a hand. Like your grandpa, remember?"

"I was just thinking of that, and of how much he admired your mother."

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A smile—brief, homely, yet appealing—crossed her face, but she said only, "We'll get the pears first."

The trees stood in a wilderness of grass and weeds out to the left of the house. They were in their bearing prime. In spite of the gorging wasps, we easily picked up a bushel of pears and lugged them back to the car. Then we headed for the plum thickets, which were in a ravine at the bottom of a steep, eroded slope behind the house. The soil became cool and sandy as we moved through the ravine, gnats hummed and swirled in our wake, our shoes ceased to disturb the quiet. It was not surprising—it seemed almost natural—to see a pair of bare feet sticking peacefully out of a sandy strip between two thickets. Lyda, at any rate, was perfectly calm.

"Wait here," she murmured, and went ahead as if certain of what she would find.

She stood at her mother's gnarled and wrinkled feet and called "Mama" twice, first as a question, then as a demand. Then she plodded back to me and said impassively, "She's asleep."

"Don't wake her. She looks so comfortable."

We moved on quietly to a heavy-laden thicket some distance away, out of sight of the bare feet. "I can remember," Lyda said soon, "when she would have thought it was a sin to take a nap in the middle of the day." It was impossible to tell whether or not she meant to apologize.

"She's earned the right," I said, "let her sleep," and we went back to the house by a different path.

Napping was not my father's idea of what Mrs. Zalesny had been doing. In recent years the old lady had started drinking. More than one story had circulated through town about people who had stumbled across her while she was sleeping it off on the bare ground.

"People who trespass on other people's property shouldn't carry tales," my mother said.

"There's no respect for property any more," my father said, as if that were her point. "But if she doesn't care, no one else will, not any more."

I wondered why Mrs. Zalesny should start hitting the bottle all of a sudden.

"She hasn't," my mother said. "Started hitting the bottle *or* all of a sudden. She always drank a little, though you may not have known that. Wine. It was the Czech in her."

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"Who knows what made her start," my father said gloomily. "Look around you. Why does anything happen the way it does?"

"And if a nap's a crime, you and I are as guilty as the next one, though I'll admit I like my comfort more than she does."

"Someday she'll fall in a gully, break an arm or leg and lie there till she dies."

"No such thing. Lyda goes out to see her every day of the world."

"That's not what she told me," I said.

"I know what she told you. She likes for people to think she doesn't give a hoot what her mother does. Lyda never has known whether to be proud or ashamed of that old lady."

"She doesn't go out there once a month," my father said.

"Biggest crape-hanger in town."

"Ask anybody."

"That's what all gossips say."

The next day was my last. In the morning, I went to town to find some presents for the children. Outside the Variety Store, I ran right into Hugh.

"Well, for Pete's sake, look who's here!" he exclaimed—and got my first name wrong.

It seemed a false note at first, as if he had contrived an error to keep me at a distance, but then I reminded myself that we hadn't really seen each other since our teens, and of course he hadn't been concentrating on *me* lately. He was handsomer as a man than he'd been as a boy and looked extremely fit, though in the way men do who are more concerned with a specific image of virility than with general health. If the stories of his trifling weren't true, it was at least easy to see how they might arise.

He showed polite interest in my parents, Carol, the children, and spared me the necessity of asking about his domestic life: he volunteered with a smile that he had remarried and was now living in Pawhuska. He had gone into business with his father-in-law; for some time now they had been buying land and cattle together.

"You haven't given up your law practice?"

"Oh, law comes in handier than anything," he said, though that didn't answer the question. "How long will you be in town?"

"I'm leaving this afternoon."

"Oh, too bad. Tom Seward and I are having a game of golf. Thought you might like to join us. Have you seen the new clubhouse?"

"Only from the outside."

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"Darned nice building. Pawhuska doesn't even have a decent *public* course. I have to drive over here to get a game in."

We shook hands—"If you're ever in our neck of the woods"—and said goodbye.

I felt let down. I don't know what I expected.

My father insisted that no one around there drove a hundred miles and stayed overnight just to play golf.

"I imagine he's here because he wants people to see that he's alive and well," my mother said.

"Then he'll have to walk down the street stark naked."

"Or be seen in the shower at the new clubhouse," I said.

I didn't tell them what Lyda had said about Jennie's starting the rumor. Carol, who was somewhat disappointed with my detective work, thought that I should have. It would have been interesting for my father to try to find out whether Hugh had stayed overnight in order to see Jennie. If he had, according to Carol, it would mean that he had tracked the rumor-monger to her lair and meant to deal with her.

"How?"

"I don't know. Maybe he could scare her. He's a lawyer."

We got a letter within a couple of days with a postscript in my father's hand: Hugh Auburn had not taken a shower after the golf game. Tom Seward, *Sr.*, presumably by way of his son, said that Hugh made some excuse to get away early—the first time anyone could remember such a thing happening.

"I don't see what that proves," Carol said, "except that a gunshot wound might embarrass him." She had now mysteriously discounted the other possibility altogether and was all but ready to write Laverne to dig up proof that Hugh was still as virile as he looked.

Not long after, we heard that Mrs. Zalesny had been killed by a car, either while she was crossing the road in front of her house or was lying in it, either sick or drunk or (as some said) just wanting to die.

The real news, however, was (or was supposed to be) that Lyda and a hired man from a neighboring farm had started living together out there. If they were married, no one knew when or where the ceremony had taken place. At any rate, Lyda had definitely moved out of town. My mother had visited her, on invitation, and asserted that the house and yard were neat as a pin. She had not seen any

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sign of a man. She regarded it as further proof of my father's decline that he was listening to talk that the man, or the man and Lyda in cahoots, had encouraged the old lady in the habit that eventually cleared the way to her property.

I noticed that, reluctantly or not, she had started writing for my father again: "He says for you to write back and tell him all you remember about the day you went out there with Lyda."

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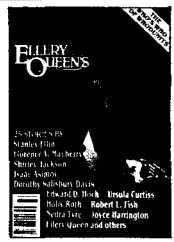

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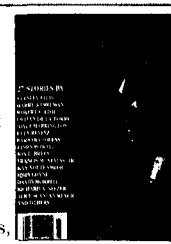

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"This time I'm writing it out as strongly as I can, hon," said Customer Service. "If you want me to, I can put that if it goes on much longer, the customer intends to turn the matter over to her attorney. Or would you rather I said her Call-for-Action reporter?"

"Which sounds scarier?"

"Either one."

She said, "Can you put down both . . . ?"

A PLEASURE TO DEAL WITH

by ANN BAYER

On October fourth she went to the department store to buy a set of canisters she had seen in an ad. The canisters came in a choice of four colors and were sale-priced at $19.95, or $21.60 with tax. Housewares had them in red and yellow and white, but she wanted them in blue. The salesperson said a shipment of blue ones was expected at the end of the week, so she ordered them and left.

On October eighteenth a postcard arrived from the store regretting there would be a delay in sending her order. Shipment was now scheduled for no later than December seventh. The store hoped this would not inconvenience her. If she should be billed before delivery, she could deduct the item from her bill until she received the merchandise.

On December fourteenth a second postcard arrived. Shipment was now scheduled for no later than February first.

On December eighteenth a third postcard arrived. Shipment was now scheduled for no later than February twenty-second.

On January twenty-eighth a fourth postcard arrived. The store

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had been unable to obtain the "flatware" she had ordered. It was very sorry and hoped it could be of service in the future. A credit had been issued and would appear on a subsequent statement.

Meanwhile, a charge of $21.60 had shown up on her October statement and when a 90¢ finance charge appeared on her November statement, she called Billing Inquiries and said she wanted the finance charge taken off. Billing Inquiries said it regretted the error.

Her December statement showed a balance of $46.72. She made another call. "I see what happened," said Billing Inquiries. "Instead of removing the 90¢ finance charge, billing duplicated the original charge of $21.60 and added a $2.00 delivery charge and a new 62¢ finance charge to the old 90¢ finance charge." Billing Inquiries said it would put through a correction.

Her January statement showed a credit for $21.60 plus 90¢, but that left the second $21.60 plus $2.00 plus 62¢ plus a new 50¢ finance charge, giving her a balance of $24.72. By this time she had received the postcard saying that the store was unable to fill her order.

The store was open late on Thursdays and the following Thursday evening she walked over and rode the elevator to the eighth-floor credit office. She explained to the credit officer what had happened and displayed her statements from October, November, December, and January and her four postcards and her customer's record slip and the canister ad she had cut out of the paper. The credit officer looked sympathetic and wrote everything down and said there shouldn't be any more trouble, but if there was she was to call a special number in Merchandising.

Her February statement showed she owed $24.72 plus a new 50¢ finance charge, bringing her balance to $25.22. She looked up the special number and called Merchandising and spoke for five minutes. Merchandising was noncommittal and told her to wait, and then switched her over to Customer Service. Customer Service wanted to know how it could be of help. She repeated what she had told Merchandising. Customer Service said it really wasn't supposed to handle problems like hers, but it didn't want her to feel she was being given the run-around so it would see what it could do.

On March sixteenth a fifth postcard arrived. It said that in reference to her recent inquiry concerning the "cutlery and fin. chg. for $21.60 & 90¢" credit did appear on her January bill.

Her March statement showed she owed $25.22 plus a new 50¢ finance charge, bringing her balance to $25.72. She telephoned Cus-

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tomer Service. Customer Service said it was sorry for the inconvenience and would do what it could.

On March twenty-ninth she received a telephone message at her office. The message said that the department store had called and credit should show up on her next statement.

At 8:30 in the evening on April seventh the store called her at home. "This is Collections," said a voice. "Apparently there's some mixup about your bill. Just what is the matter with it?" She explained what the matter with it was and the voice assured her the mistake would be corrected, but if the mistake wasn't corrected she was to call a special number in Collections.

On April eleventh a letter arrived from the Department of Accounts. Her account was behind in payment and would she please send her check immediately. They would very much prefer not to move her account to their delinquent file.

She telephoned Accounts, which said its records showed that $21.60 plus a 90¢ finance charge had been credited back in January. She explained that she had been charged twice for something she had never received even once. Accounts said it regretted the error and would pass the information along.

On April thirteenth a sixth postcard arrived. It was the same as the one she had received on March sixteenth. A credit for $21.60 plus 90¢ had appeared on her January bill.

She telephoned Customer Service and said she was the canister lady and described the telephone message at her office and the evening phone call from Collections and the delinquent-file letter from Accounts and the sixth postcard. Customer Service said it could imagine her frustration and that it would see what it could do.

That afternoon Customer Service called her back and said, "I've just spoken to Adjustments and a credit will be reflected on your next statement."

"You are wonderful," she said.

"Some customers really lose their temper, but you have been a pleasure to deal with," said Customer Service.

"And *you* have been a pleasure to deal with," she said.

"Don't take this the wrong way," said Customer Service, "but I hope you and I never have to talk again, at least not concerning this matter."

On April fifteenth a letter arrived from Bill Adjustments, thanking her for her inquiry concerning her account and enclosing a pho-

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tocopy of her January statement showing that $21.60 plus 90¢ had been credited.

Her April statement showed she owed $25.72 plus a new finance charge of 88¢, bringing her balance to $26.60. She called the special number in Collections that the voice on the phone had given her on April seventh. Collections said it would put through a memo to Merchandising.

She then called Customer Service. "This time I'm writing it out as strongly as I can, hon," said Customer Service. "If you want me to, I can put that if it goes on much longer, the customer intends to turn the matter over to her attorney. Or would you rather I said her Call-for-Action reporter?"

"Which sounds scarier?"

"Either one."

She said, "Can you put down both?"

"Sure. I'll put down both and really shake them up."

The following day the housewares department called her at her office and said it was processing a credit for the duplicate charge plus her six finance charges. "Seven months is a long time," said Housewares. "Someone along the line should have resolved this thing."

That Thursday evening she went from work directly to the department store. She took the elevator back to the eighth-floor credit office and showed the credit officer her letter from Accounts, her letter from Bill Adjustments, her six postcards, and her seven monthly statements. The credit officer called Collections and explained that she had been charged twice for a non-delivery.

"Bill Adjustments and Collections never seem to know what each other is doing," the credit officer said to her, "and sometimes we have to beat up on both of them."

She asked if a credit would show up on her May bill.

"More than likely the answer is no," said the credit officer. "It takes about six weeks to do a merchandising adjustment and the adjustment is just going through this week. It doesn't matter, though, because I'm going to put through a Do Not Dun."

On May fifth a seventh postcard arrived. It said that in reference to her recent inquiry concerning the "canisters for $23.60," credit had been given on her January bill.

Her May statement showed a credit for $21.60, but that left $5.00 worth of finance charges plus a new finance charge of 50¢, bringing her balance to $5.50. She called Billing Inquiries and explained the

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situation. The voice on the phone said the information would be passed along to the billing area.

"But aren't you Billing Inquiries?" she said.

"No," said the voice, "I'm Customer Service."

"Then where is the billing area?"

"It's located elsewhere."

"Yes, but where?" she said.

"Elsewhere, not here, elsewhere," said Customer Service.

Her June statement showed a new finance charge of 50¢, bringing her balance to $6.00. She sat down and wrote a six-page letter to the president of the department store, recounting everything that had happened over the last nine months. "Six pages might seem like a lot to wade through," she wrote, "but I think you will find they have a certain Kafka-esque fascination that will carry you along."

On July fifteenth she received a letter saying that her recent correspondence to the president of the store had been referred to the attention of Credit Operations for reply. The Credit Operations manager was extremely sorry to learn of the difficulty she had encountered regarding a purchase of canisters and had issued credit in the amount of $6.00 which would be reflected on her July statement.

Her July statement showed a new finance charge of 50¢, bringing her balance to $6.50.

The morning after the July statement arrived, she called in sick at her office and then walked to the department store. In housewares she bought a carving knife with a serrated blade for $34.10 including tax. She paid for it with cash. The salesperson wrapped the knife in tissue paper and put it in a shopping bag.

From housewares, she took the elevator to the eighth floor. A receptionist directed her to the office of the Credit Operations manager. She knocked, went in, and closed the door behind her.

Two minutes later she emerged. She rode the elevator to the street level and returned home, where she collected her mail. Back in her apartment, she withdrew the carving knife from the shopping bag. Its blade was covered with a sticky red substance. She took a felt-tip marker and printed DEPT. STORE on the handle, then went to the kitchen and put the knife in a drawer full of bloodstained implements. There was a cleaver labeled ELECTRIC CO., a long-handled fork labeled BANK, shears labeled CREDIT CARD CO., and an ice-pick labeled LANDLORD.

Finally she turned her attention to the mail. When she opened her phone bill, she found she had been charged $94.55 for speaking

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twenty-six minutes to YEM AR REP. She called the telephone company and asked what YEM AR REP stood for. Billing Inquiries looked up her account and said, "Our records show you put through an operator-assisted call to Yemen in the Arab Republic."

She said, "But I don't know anyone in the Arab Republic."

Billing Inquiries said it would have to investigate the charge, but meantime would put through a credit for $94.55. It assured her the credit would be reflected on her next statement.

DETECTIVERSE

ANOTHER GRAVE TONE

by JAMES HOLDING

Underneath this stone reclines
All that's left of Harry Hines—
Insurance broker of tender age
Shot by his wife in a jealous rage,
And thus brought low before his time
By what is termed "white-collar crime."
I.e., she found on Harry's shirt
A stain that was neither blood nor dirt,
But a lipstick shade called Wild Strawberry
That was worn by Harry's secretary.

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Quaid had kept clear of women, and particularly American women, for nearly three years, since Rosanna had died. He was alarmed by the suddenness of his interest in this new woman, and by the nagging familiarity of her movements and speech . . .

A QUIET, LONELY PLACE

by J. W. WHITEHEAD

Quaid walked the narrow streets of Winchester by the hour, watching for a sign. He found, typically, that when he was looking for a sign, he found no shortage of them. A little black car with a tire low on air ran a red light, hit a hole in the cobbles, and had a flat. Three floors above the street, over a wine shop, a man with a hand over one eye squinted at the street with his uncovered eye. Quaid passed a book in the gutter with no cover. In another gutter, he saw the weatherworn remains of a dirty magazine, and in another a half full bottle of cheap stout with the neck of the bottle broken off. He wondered briefly, before discarding the bottle to its random obscurity, why he recognized it as half full rather than half empty. Memory recalled a girl, some years before, who had called him an optimist for looking at bottles that way—an optimist and a drunkard. He couldn't remember her name, only that it hadn't been worth remembering.

Quaid hadn't had any new money in two weeks. The old money might last another week if he lived like a mole. But Quaid always lived like a mole. It was part of the living—and while the living wasn't a good one, there weren't actually many good ones left anywhere. He thought perhaps owning a small pub might still be a good one, if you could keep their fingers out of you. Yet even a small pub needed money, and at first a big clump of it. There wasn't much chance in his line of making that sort of clump—at least, not honestly. Or if you carried the large informations, they had their fingers in you: though you'd have the money, it wouldn't be a good living at all.

It was the hour after tea in Winchester, and the sun made the

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town look richer than it already was. The Americans were in their rooms, changing for dinner. They always came out for dinner too early. He could see them every evening, just after six, stopping to read the menus posted on the closed-up pub doors, wandering until they found something open.

A loud group of Americans came across the square. Their voices chased each other over the cobblestones. Quaid knew how they would look: the men were wearing sharkskin this year and gleamed even in half light; the women looked statically glamorous, with clouds of hair around their heads.

"Sir?" called a woman's voice.

Quaid made certain he didn't turn to them, and regretted the subtle stiffening he'd felt in his shoulders.

"Sir?"

He turned and saw the four Americans looking at him. One of the women had stepped tentatively toward him, as toward a forest animal. Her three friends waited as if on the balls of their feet, ready to snatch her back.

"Yes?" he said, and smoothed his coat and came up to them.

"Could you tell us if there are any restaurants open where we could get dinner?" Her hip cocked: her tentativeness had gone when she'd got a good look at his coat, expensive once, but worn. It told people he shared their values, but not their means, and so gave them a sense of power. No matter to whom he was speaking, he could say honestly that the coat was a good cover. Honesty was of value to him. He resented his work for requiring him to devalue it, and when he could he preferred to avoid lying. Newley had warned him about that.

"I couldn't say that there is," he said. "There are a few bistros in the west section, near the cathedral, but that's where all the students feed." He looked at them quickly, one at a time. "It seems as if you're out for a better spot than that."

The woman said, "That would be fine." She added, as if ashamed, "We're famished."

Quaid found this touch of shame, even if it were pretended, to be more attractive to him than he would have wished. He looked frankly at her and said, "They're by the cathedral, then—" hoping to leave, but the beauty of her eyes struck him like a blunt instrument. And when she said, "Would you mind showing us?" he knew he'd done the right thing in waiting all day through countless false

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signs. Newley had also warned him about the pretty face, but it seemed Newley had warned Quaid at least once about everything.

The American woman was somehow familiar to him: that was his sign. It was not so much her appearance, though he liked the simple jewelry, the long body, the round, small face; there was, rather, a familiar air about her, something distanced yet nonetheless personal, as if he'd known her cousin, or a close friend.

"Have you been here long?" he asked, and noticed immediately it was a hopelessly inexact question.

She handled it with grace. "In Winchester, no. We just arrived this afternoon. But we've been in the U.K. for—what is it now? Three weeks." She'd turned to her companions, who nodded, but seemed unable to speak.

Quaid barely noticed the others. He already watched the woman as he had watched few women: it was, in fact, the way he watched the priest, when he could coax himself to communion (he couldn't repent of his lies, so communion could be no more than a prayer for an undetermined future). As the priest moved through the ritual, Quaid watched intently to be ready for his part in the mystery. Newley had warned him about church, too. Newley meant well, Quaid knew, but how did one get along if he could never give himself up to something? Of course, that was the standard: surrender only when options were exhausted.

The lawns of the cathedral looked wet and cool as Quaid led them into the square. A hotel had been built in the southeast corner, as ugly as a dustbin, with a carpark underneath and swarming with Americans. The cathedral looked as if it were ignoring the intrusion only through maintained dignity. Quaid brought them to the bistros along the north wall of the square. The windows were bright with opera lights, and the air was heavy with the shouts and laughter of students. Quaid watched with the Americans for a moment, then excused himself.

The woman stopped him and told the others to go in. She said, "Thank you, Mr.—"

"Quaid," he said regretfully, though it was his name and had always been. He had kept clear of women, and particularly American women, for nearly three years, since Rosanna had died. He was alarmed by the suddenness of his interest in this new woman, and by the nagging familiarity of her movements and speech.

It had been almost three years since Rosanna had been shot and killed not a foot away from where he'd stood beside her in the ca-

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thedral close. She'd been rummaging through her purse, agitated, reciting a litany of apologies that made no sense, asking him if he loved her, and how much, and if it was enough. Among her effects, his people had later found papers Quaid had been carrying from London to be delivered to Newley's superiors, unopened. Quaid could forgive her her intention to betray him, because she'd relented. He knew he might very well have forgiven her anyway. But her repentance had come too late: her counter-superiors had nosed her reticence. These people Quaid could not so easily forgive; no one was caught.

Quaid hadn't worked regularly since. He took work from the other messengers, and the odd job from the Americans and French. Newley never used him again, of course. In fact, Newley had only seen Quaid once more, to tell him to kiss off. Quaid never needed to be told that twice, except perhaps by a woman. Newley also warned him once again about the pretty face. He seemed unnecessarily brutal with Quaid, as though Quaid would never be able to hear it enough.

"Mr. Quaid," the American woman said, and took his hand to shake it. She watched her companions into the bistro, then led him a little distance down the square, clipped to his arm.

"Just Quaid is all right," he said.

"Quaid, then. We had a mutual friend."

Quaid felt a faint bubbling of panic in his stomach, a minor disquiet that he knew might be easily quelled by resuming a mole's life, underground. He had little doubt that their mutual friend was Rosanna Collins, and that for almost three years, through all the missed and confused and recognized signs he'd seen, this was the one for which he'd ultimately waited.

Because it was his job, Quaid said, "I don't see how—"

She nodded, as if she already knew what he would say. "Let me introduce myself," she said. "I'm Tracy Collins. I worked with my sister."

Rosanna had never spoken of her family, but of course it was so. Quaid had recognized the familial resemblances in Tracy, even if they weren't cosmetic. Quaid and Tracy wandered out of the courtyard and through the great stone archway that entered the main street. The cobbled street wound up to the stone archway at the top of the hill, beyond which sat the history museum, looking as old as anything it contained. Occasional gaggles of Americans floated by, looking for open pubs. The sun had set and some of the pubs had pinned open their doors for the evening's crowd. A smell of well fried

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gravy seeped from the doors. Youths stood in the side streets playing cassettes in their beatboxes, waiting for the teenager clubs to open at nine o'clock.

Quaid took her to Swanson's, a little pub he liked along the river. He wouldn't have minded owning a small spot like Swanson's. He ordered them shepherd's pie and beets and stout. As he sat in the back with Tracy, away from the counters and across the brown room from the game machines, he found how much he truly admired Swanson's, and how much he'd loved Rosanna. He hadn't allowed himself even so much as to miss her, but he knew now that it had always been an idea of his, somewhere obscured yet safe, that to own a pub like Swanson's and live above it with Rosanna would be a good living, honest and dull and quiet. Tracy nodded when he told her this: she said it was true, that their line was no living, but how could you really get out once they'd got their fingers into you? Quaid was moved. He remembered saying the same thing himself—he'd confided it to Rosanna.

They walked back together afterward to her hotel, and Quaid asked if he might see her again.

"How about lunch tomorrow?" she said.

He was short of money, but he quickly agreed. "What about your friends?" he said.

"They can find things to do. The three of them work with me. We're not just friends."

At the mention of business, Quaid tightened. "Are you on assignment?" he said.

She smiled. "My sister described you to me so well," she said, "from your appearance to what you will say next. I always wondered how she could fall in love so quickly, but she must have managed. I feel I already know you." The gentle pressure of her hand on his was like a persistent force. She kissed his cheek and disappeared up the stairs with her room key.

They ate lunch at The Mill, a restaurant he knew she'd like because all the Americans ate there, and Rosanna had loved it. After they were finished their soup and while they were waiting for their entrees, Quaid asked her, "Why have you come here?"

He had spent a good portion of the night passing over the worn carpet in his room and projecting her response to this question—had, in fact, foreseen what she might say, and what she would have to say if he were to believe her from this point forward. She might

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have said she'd come to meet the man her sister had loved when she'd died; she would have to say something about Rosanna's death, and why she'd waited three years.

"Why do you think I've come?" she said.

"I don't know." He wanted to give her some help, he wanted to trust her.

"My sister loved you," she said. She looked over her teacup at him as she sipped from it. The beauty of her hands and face was a gun prodding his back.

"And?"

"She died beside you, for God's sake. She died here. Haven't you considered that I loved her, too?"

Whatever Quaid may not have seen, he had seen that. If he never believed another word she breathed, he would believe that. "I'm sorry," he said. "Of course."

Tracy poured them both more hot water. Quaid ordered another whiskey, then tended to his tea.

"Now, it is true I came here on business as well."

Quaid hated the very word. It was everywhere: the deceit got into one's bed and one's food and one's communion cup until everything was tainted with it. He'd never said it before, not even to Rosanna, but he said: "I hate this damned business."

Tracy looked at him sadly. "You don't know anything else, do you?" she said. Quaid shook his head. "Poor Quaid." She took his hand and stroked it. "They recruited Rosanna and me right off the campus," she said. "Two bright-eyed poli-sci majors with a flair for languages. But I suppose Rosie told you all this."

"No," he said, for Rosanna had told him next to nothing, like the good little spy she'd been—far better than he'd ever hope to be, certainly. He fed hungrily on this crumb of information, because he was gathering these crumbs for himself, and he'd never have to pass them on. "Go on," he said, and she did, telling him of a childhood in Iowa and Maryland, of college days at Johns Hopkins. Quaid listened, rapt. It was all personal. There was no mention of business.

"You really did love her, didn't you?" said Tracy. He detected unmistakably a note of pity in her voice.

"Yes," he said. He'd barely touched his lunch.

"We think we know who killed her."

"How? That is, after all this time—"

"Are you interested?"

"Who?"

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"Newley. Will you help us find him?"

Quaid spilled a puddle of tea into his saucer, reaching for his whiskey. He hadn't seen Newley for two and a half years. "Newley," he said.

"Will you help?"

Quaid nodded, looked into the glinting eyes of Tracy Collins, and didn't even blink. "Yes," he said. "I'll help."

Quaid had never shot a gun, had never held a gun on another man. Against the advice of every operative he'd ever known, he didn't even own a gun. The gun he bought with the advance Tracy Collins had ready for him felt like a lump of solid evil in his coat pocket—after carrying it with him for a day or two, he developed a limp because it weighed so heavily on one side.

Tracy took him to the most expensive cafes and inns in Winchester, on her account. He never saw her companions from the first evening; they were always out and about, putting out feelers for Newley. He told Tracy about what her sister had almost done to him. Tracy listened intently, and explained that their sector had begun to suspect Newley of passing American intelligence to unfriendly sources. They had decided to intercept some of his correspondence, carried, as it developed, by Quaid, in order to test their suspicions. Rosanna had been sent, but she had fallen in love—and gotten careless.

Quaid wondered how she had gotten careless: he had never suspected a thing—of any of them. Tracy explained that Rosanna was strictly ordered to examine only Newley's correspondence. Yet the morning of the day she was killed, Rosanna mistakenly took the papers later found in her purse, the papers which bypassed Newley's hands entirely. Her carelessness was fatally manifested by Newley's cunning, however: he had spotted her entering Quaid's hotel when he knew Quaid was out on assignment, and had identified her searching Quaid's room and discovering correspondence yet to be delivered. Rosanna had seen that someone was watching her, but not who: Newley eluded her identification.

"We have no doubt it was Newley," said Tracy. Her words were fiery and final for all their lack of specificity. Quaid felt vaguely dissatisfied with the story, yet certainly more satisfied than he'd felt with Newley's abrupt, callous behavior.

He began sending word to Newley through the old channels, leak-

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ing his own name, and Rosanna's. He found he was thankful for the gun: it helped him to concentrate on good and bad, rather than right and wrong. Anytime he began considering right and wrong, he became lost in a hopeless muddle. He could take good and bad into his bed at night and hide them under the pillow with the hard lump of the gun. Right and wrong wouldn't stay neatly under the pillow: they sat with him in the darkness, keeping him from the quiet and loneliness he'd come to value as he did honesty. He got to sleep most nights by clutching the gun the way a child clutches a stuffed bear.

One morning nearly two weeks after Tracy had come to him, Quaid was awakened by the telephone's endless ringing.

It was Newley. "Quaid," he said.

"Newley." Quaid shook his head, trying to clear the sand away.

"Quaid, we must meet."

"Where?"

"You need to understand that we are both—"

"Not now," said Quaid. "Where?"

"The old spot, the old time, tomorrow. And for God's sake, Quaid, come alone. Don't bring that bitch with you."

"What are you talking about?"

"The sister."

"Who?"

"Damn it, Quaid, you know who I mean. Would you like me to say it? All right, then: the sister of the girl I killed three years ago, damn you."

"So you did kill her."

"Of course I did, Quaid. If you'd allow me a moment—"

"The old spot, then." Quaid rang off before Newley could add any more. Whatever it was, Quaid wasn't interested: he had discovered early on that the more you listened to someone, the more chance there was that you might trust him. He limped across the room and dug a pint of Gilbey's from his bottom dresser drawer. It was half empty. By the end of the morning he'd emptied it. He drank gin when he knew it was going to be hot.

Tracy came up around noon and brought him out into the sunlit main street. The center of town was as hot, crowded, and noisy as a bazaar. He pulled her into a side street and they walked away from the center.

"I've made contact with Newley."

"Will he meet you?"

"He suggested it." As he said this, he was struck by its strangeness,

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even in a world of such strangeness, and by Newley's candor in a world of deception.

"When?"

"Tomorrow. Our old spot."

"Where is that?"

Quaid looked quickly at her, quickly away. His limp had come back and he asked if they could rest a moment in the shade. He said, "I don't want you to come." He wasn't certain what he expected her to say in return, but he was pleased when she agreed.

They ate lunch in a hot, still Indian restaurant. Quaid had beef curry and it burned his tongue like coals. He had some more gins.

"Could I ask you a favor?" he said.

"What is it?"

"Rosanna was religious. Are you religious as well?"

"In a sense, I suppose. I don't think about it all that often. It seems unprofessional. Why?"

"Come to matins with me tomorrow."

"Why?"

"I would very much like to go, and I feel as though I'll need a bit of coaxing in the morning."

They set the time he'd pick her up at her hotel, and parted. He spent the last of his advance that afternoon on a light spring overcoat and another pint bottle of Gilbey's. Tracy had promised that new money was coming by wire any day. "There's no bureaucracy like American bureaucracy," she reminded him.

Quaid spent the night sobering up for communion.

At seven-thirty, the streets were wet and deserted. He hadn't slept a minute all night. He saw nothing to take or mistake for a sign. Tracy waited for him in the lobby of her hotel. They walked slowly to the cathedral. Tracy stopped twice to straighten her stockings, and they arrived as morning prayers were ending. Quaid felt uneasy, as if he'd missed something extraordinarily important, though communion was why he'd come.

"Do you want to take communion?" he said.

"Sure," she said.

He watched her walk easily to the choir and sit down. He approached cautiously, praying for the absolution of sins he knew he must commit again, and for others he'd never had to think about before. He hated the business more than the leaden gun in his pocket, more than Rosanna's murderer, more than death itself. Tracy waited

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for him, smiling encouragement and confidence. Quaid couldn't bring himself to sit by her. He sat in the front-center of the choir, full of loneliness and regret. The cold quietness of the vaults mocked him. He could hear the swish of the acolytes' robes behind the murmuring priest and thought it sounded like soft shovelfuls of dirt filling in the hole where he lived underground. When he ate the bread and drank the cup, he knew he'd spent another communion outside of grace. He turned and spied Tracy. She took the sacraments as easily as morning tea.

That night at nine-thirty, Quaid came down from his room into the noisy Saturday-night streets. As usual, he looked immediately for a sign. The teenagers had queued outside the under-age clubs and fought and shouted. Down the side streets boys and girls were tucked into shut-up shop thresholds, groping at one another. He could never be certain if this was anger or love—they might have been throttling one another. One or two small ugly boys called after Quaid because of his limp, but he ignored them. From who else's expense could they benefit? Americans walked here and there in small groups like vigilantes, eyeing the teenagers with distrust. He had his sign, then, in the whole swirling street scene: he was implacable; they could not alter him. He had determined his loyalties. Quaid had known the love of a woman, and whatever the wishes of her sister Tracy, whatever the deceptions of Newley, he could trust the admission of love that could not be revoked: Rosanna's fumbled apologies before her death.

Quaid limped on up the hill toward the museum in whose shadows he would meet and kill Newley. The teenagers' voices had begun to fade. The tourists had thinned, too. The clubs and restaurants and bistros were all mainly below. The museum sat diffidently on the other side of the stone archway that stretched over the main avenue. An occasional car trickled through the arch on its return to the highway.

He envied the ancient stones of the town their implacability: his own seemed little more than his latest deception, in which he'd deceived no one but himself.

Just before he reached the archway, a fleet of pigeons dove from the arch's underbelly as if scattered by shotgun. They flew uncoordinatedly in as many directions as there were birds—at least a dozen, perhaps more. Quaid had heard no sound, but he dove into the cold stone shadows and put his damp hand on the colder metal of the

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gun. He crept along the wall of the arch as the pigeons returned, one after another. He heard their soft purls sifting like lost feathers through the dark. The lights of the museum stood before him.

Quaid ran with his hand in his pocket across the open courtyard and landed with his back against the wall of the museum. He could see nothing but the boldness of the dark down the face of the building.

"Quaid." The voice was Newley's, not twenty feet away.

"Newley?"

"Down here, Quaid."

Quaid edged along the building and made out Newley's form tight against the wall. Newley held a gun.

"Can I assume you still don't carry a gun, Quaid?"

Quaid fingered the gun in his pocket, concentrating on good and bad. "You can," he said.

"Were you followed?" said Newley, without putting the gun down as he used to do.

Quaid hadn't once checked. He might have been followed by a parade. He remembered the sudden flight of the pigeons, but he hadn't checked even then. "Of course not," he said.

"Quaid, we're both in danger."

"You could lessen that problem by putting your gun away." Quaid could discern Newley's features by this time.

Newley smiled a thin, pleasureless smile. "I can't, Quaid. This bitch of yours is the danger. Who can I trust if it becomes impossible to trust poor Quaid?"

Quaid pulled the gun into his hand, keeping both submerged deep in the pocket and wondering when Newley would ask him to pull his hands from his coat.

"You see, Quaid, I know Rosanna Collins wanted to give those papers back to you. You'll say she had a change of heart. She was going to give them to you when I shot her in the cathedral, wasn't she?"

Quaid knew he had listened to too much, that he would never feel confident about what he chose to do next: he was obliged to the nuances of right and wrong. It never paid to listen in a line like theirs. He was paid to inform, to carry the word. He had never made tuppence listening to any of them. "Newley, don't."

"Don't what? Didn't you love her?" Tracy's words echoed in Newley's, in a similar tone of pity. "What did I tell you about that, Quaid? What did I warn you over and over again? She wanted you to have

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those papers, I won't deny it—but if you'd gotten them I might have had to stop you as well.

"Rosanna was replanting falsified information in our organization. We don't know who was paying her, but we know America wasn't benefiting. We suspected her, but we needed one good sting. London prepared a list of enemy operatives in our sector—most all fabricated, of course, though Rosanna's name was added. She saw the level of secrecy on it and couldn't resist its contents. Yet when she attempted to give it back to you I knew something unexpected was happening. She wanted the papers to go to my superiors, and so I had to stop her."

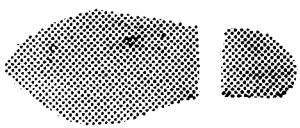
"Why would she want to identify herself?" said Quaid, but he feared he knew why.

"She was ready to get out, Quaid. It wouldn't matter. She simply added some names to the list. My name was on that list, Quaid, and so was yours. The codes had been altered. It was a new document."

Quaid felt the gun sag back into the bottom of his coat, felt its weight like a mortified organ from his own body. Newley put his own gun away, reached into Quaid's pocket, and retrieved the gun. "There's a car waiting around back to take us to the airfield. We'll look after you. But we haven't much time."

Newley regarded him with sad fondness, Quaid thought. Newley had saved both their lives by trusting him not to shoot. "You always were a good man, Quaid—so trusting. I thought of you as I would a naive school chum: bright enough, but needing a bit of looking after. It's to my eternal shame that I ever used you, seeing how impossible I must have known it would be for you. Imagine what you intended to do tonight, Quaid: you intended to kill a man."

Quaid slid slowly down the wall to the ground as if he'd been shot. He sat there in the silence, feeling the cold seep through his too-thin coat.



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THE JURY BOX
by ALLEN J. HUBIN

Over 350 volumes of mystery fiction have been identified as having their principal settings in Scotland. Many authors have placed one or two stories in that country, over its countryside, in Glasgow or Edinburgh, or the Hebrides. Others, usually Scotland-born, have concentrated their criminous attentions more extensively on their homeland. The more prolific of these have included James M'Govan, in the nineteenth century, and more recently Janet Caird, Angus MacVicar (not published in the U.S.), and Gerald Hammond. But clearly the most attentive to Scottish landscape and people has been Bill Knox, with dozens of titles in this category.

Essentially, all of Knox's books under his own name are set in Scotland. He writes also as Robert MacLeod, Michael Kirk, and Noah Webster, and these, too, frequently touch on Scottish soil. As Webster, he tells about the adventures of Jonathan Gaunt of the Queen's Remembrancer's Office in Edinburgh. The ninth such novel is *A Flight from Paris* (Doubleday, $12.95). David Blackthorn, freelance pilot, has died. Alive, he was troublesome; dead, he's a disaster. It appears that Blackthorn's death was engineered by his unofficial masters, who are engaged in a massive money-laundering scheme. Said masters are determined to eliminate all living traces of their enterprises, so the dying continues, with Gaunt energetically on the trail before all the evidences go underground. A fine story—Knox is a most facile storyteller—with Scotland and its highlands much in effective evidence.

M. R. D. Meek writes about Lennox Kemp, who graduated in law and practiced it for a time. Then, as fruit of his sins, he was disbarred, and for six years he's been employed by McCready's Detective Agency. In *The Split Second* (Scribners, $13.95), McCready's owners ask of him a favor: look after Fiona Davison-Maclean, who seems to have fallen from wealthy old maidenhood into the arms of a traveling man. So to an inhospitable Scotland Kemp goes, where death awaits along an anquishing trail. A good story, with sharply caught characters and locales.

Martha Grimes' eighth story about Inspector Richard Jury is *I Am the Running Footman* (Little Brown, $15.95). As with all in this series, pubs play a central role and the title is the name of one of them. Jury is first drawn into the action when the srangled body of Ivy Childess is found near the Running Footman in London. But parallels to a death in Devon, almost a year earlier, suggest that most difficult of murderers to catch is at work—the random serial killer. This is the usual witty and stylish Grimes work, with some delightful

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set pieces—one involving the curious Winslow family, to which Jury comes to direct his attentions, and another an accident-prone pub called the Mortal Man, which inflicts its indignities on both Jury and his titled friend, Melrose Plant.

Cover-Up (Doubleday, $12.95) is Anthony Oliver's third novel about Inspector John Webber and his friend, Lizzie Thomas, and most pleasant it is, with notable richness in casting. Thomas usually is the pointer and prodder that propels the retired Webber into motion. So it is here, when an antique dealer dies in the home of an actress on the English countryside. Thomas calls the circumstances suspicious, and so they prove. In due course, it develops that someone truly nasty is at work. The people of Flaxfield are surely well caught, but enjoy this, too, for the nicely worked out plot.

Al Nudger, the St. Louis private eye, returns in *Ride the Lightning* by John Lutz (St. Martin's, $15.95). Curtis Colt, a thief and convicted killer, is scheduled to die in a week in the electric chair, to "ride the lightning." His girl friend surfaces suddenly and asks Nudger to make a last-ditch effort to prove Colt innocent of the murder. So Al goes around to the witnesses, finding them unswerving in their testimony. He sees Colt's feisty lawyer, who's not hopeful. He interviews an alleged colleague of Colt's who says he and Colt were robbing elsewhere when the killing happened. Along the way, Nudger picks up a tail, an unfriendly man who insists with large fists and pointed shoes that Nudger drop the case. Crisp, effective narrative, with a notable gloominess of viewpoint.

The able Simon Brett offers a new sleuth in *A Nice Class of Corpse* (Scribners, $13.95), and well met she is. Brett takes us to Littlehampton, to the Devereau Hotel, a retirement establishment of class and cost and corresponding pretentions. We meet its inhabitants, sketched with loving and satiric care. New to their number is the unconventional Melitta Pargeter, whose late husband left her money, plus a working knowledge of skeleton keys and the opening of safes. Among the inmates, presided over by the stuffy and ritual-loving Miss Naismith, is also the "diarist," who is developing a fondness for and a skill in murder —though not quite enough of the latter, for the widow Pargeter is both observant and perceptive. Amusing and fun to read.

The second volume of a trilogy about New Orleans and a black cop named Captain Rat Trapp is *A Project Named Desire* by John William Corrington and Joyce H. Corrington (Viking, $14.95). Desire is a black housing project, a grim, drug-infested place from which only the very fortunate escape. Trapp came from there, as did Camille Bynum, the only real love of his life. But she escaped farther, to Los Angeles, there to raise her son to become a nationally famous rock singer and crusader against drugs. Now Camille and son have returned to New Orleans for a concert, where the dying begins. At the same time, Rat is protecting a

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crucial witness against Franco Burnucci, mob head of the city's drug supply. But not protecting well enough. Through this landscape, Trapp strides, dispensing death and his own brand of justice. A forceful, irresistible novel.

Marilyn Hollis has several lovers and no visible means of support. Her lovers start expiring unnaturally, and the good men of the 87th Precinct think that one of the lovers is probably taking a dim view of the others. Or that Marilyn is taking a dim view of all of them. But one of the cops, Detective Hal Willis, leaps not to such conclusions but into bed with Marilyn. This is not so welcome a development to colleague Steve Carella, and not, in the main, recommended to increase the objective sleuthly powers of the bedded cop. The usual good fare, here, in *Poison* by Ed McBain (Arbor, $16.95): spare procedural prose, with intriguing and unexpected plot wrinkles well supplied.

England's Emma Page features the cases of Chief Inspector Kelsey and Sergeant Lambert, of which the latest is *Final Moments* (Doubleday, $12.95). The beautiful Vanetia Franklin, carefree divorcee, is found murdered in her car. Kelsey's investigation turns up no shortage of suspects and motives—a financially strapped ex-husband, whom Franklin was cheerfully bleeding; a lover, discarded; another lover with a history of violence; and more. But the motives are not compelling and clear evidence is absent. Kelsey will have to look at the affair from another angle. A well crafted tale, with only the psychology of the actual killer a little doubtful.

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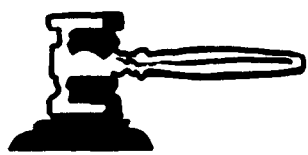

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MYSTERY STEW

by LOUIS WEINSTEIN

How does one make mystery stew?
This recipe is tried and true:

Start with a missing antique gun,
A serial killer on the run.
Next come the subtly poisoned glass,
The trail of footprints in the grass.
Shake in a potent dab of sex,
A pinch of mystic mountain hex,
The missing handle from a broom,
The ins and outs of a well sealed room,
Exotic essence of nightshade,
The cryptic speech of downstairs maid,
The fast, efficient cyanide,
The even faster fatal ride,
The dog that barks without a reason,
The dog that doesn't bark in season,
The murderous, clever, rigged device,
The melting dagger carved of ice.
A spare kidnap gives zest to flavor,
As does the bite of blackmail's savor,
The impromptu push down a cliff,
A boating mishap faked with skiff,
The silken noose drawn tight round a neck,
Doctored brakes that cause a car wreck.
And last, for extra golden measure,
A heaping trunk of hidden treasure—
Or else a house high on a hill
Wherein is read a curious will
To heirs who yearn to be remembered
But stand to get instead dismembered.
Stir well, and then add to the pot
Choice, moist clues to thicken the plot . . .

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Time now to introduce the sleuth,
Intent on digging out the truth—
He may be short, he may be tall,
He may not be a he at all—
Yet he's the meat of every story,
Classic, comic, hard-boiled, gory.
Storehouse of knowledge in grey cells,
His inner thoughts he never tells
(Save to his bumbling confidant,
Who smokes a lot and looks askance),
And yet his mind is ever working,
Divining where the evil's lurking—
Child's play to him the deadly blade,
The masked man skulking in the shade,
The atmosphere of doom and gloom,
The dusty cellar, musty tomb,
The corpse immured within a wall,
The corpse that's not a corpse at all.
Nothing can foil his mighty mind,
What's farthest out, doubt not, he'll find—
No clue escapes his searching eye,
He sees through each deceit and lie—
No herring of whatever hue
Can throw him off, so red will do.

See how the cauldron boils and bubbles,
Blending all the toils and troubles—
But just to make detecting harder,
Toss in more tasties from the larder:
The midnight swim across the lake,
The baffling death by gross mistake,
The body swept away by tide,
The murder masked as suicide.
Add movements to and movements fro,
The clock that's fast, the clock that's slow
(Of course the sleuth is fully able
To reconstruct the right timetable),
The telltale clipping yellowed long,
The painting on the wall hung wrong,
The photo missing from the frame,

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The extra pawn in the chess game.
To give the stew some extra bulk,
Drop in a football-playing hulk,
A gentleman who overboozes,
An ancient soul who nods and snoozes,
A traveler from a far-off land,
A worthy rumored of Black Hand,
A dowager who's flip and flighty,
A preacher close to the Almighty,
An actress from the Broadway stage,
A fresh-faced kid of any age.
Of these you must be wary, though—
Don't let the cookplot overflow.

Can the poor sleuth, bedeviled man,
Unravel all this? Of course he can!
The sleuth's innate acuity
Can pierce the fog like ABC.
He tracks down motive—hate or greed,
Revenge for prior heinous deed,
Protection of a loved one's name,
To bar exposing family shame.
He can't be fooled by a masquerader
Who wooed a woman and then betrayed her.
He finds in a blooming flowerbed
The resting place of the vanished dead.
That saintly maiden, sweet as honey,
Killed Dad for his insurance money.
That down-faced kid, with lots of cheek,
Drowned Uncle Abner in the creek.
That jealous wife, so prim and proper,
Did spousie in with a meat chopper.

The toothsome dish is not quite done,
So sleuth assembles one by one
The motley gang who form the cast
For grand finale to repast.
Into the drawing room they amble,
And there the sleuth without preamble
Proceeds with logic sharp as knives

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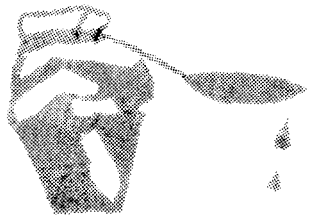
To prove what killers took what lives,
And how and why and when and then
Repeats the selfsame spiel again,
Explaining how the dark-dyed villains
Almost—not quite—got by with killin's,
Because, of course, the dogged sleuth
Brought to the scene his nose for truth
And by his brilliance, quite unmatched,
Contrived to get the plot unhatched.
He's smug with pride, for excellent cause.
He's talked for hours without pause,
A very marathon of tongue
That ends with killers getting hung.

That's how you make mystery stew—
A recipe that's tried and true.



DETECTIVERSE

WARNING

by JAMES NEILL NORTHE

A pinch of this and a pinch of that—
These crimesters lure with obvious pride.
But who will know if they might not add
Just one wee smidgen of cyanide?

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Ed. Note: Mr. Northe's verse was received after publication of our December 1986 issue containing holiday recipes from some of our contributors.

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first publication in the U.S.

If you're wondering why it has been such a long time since we've had a story from Ruth Rendell, note that her collected stories of M. R. James was published in England in February, her novella Heartstones *in April, and her annual novel in June. Her second novel as written by Barbara Vine was published in March and picked up by the Book-of-the-Month Club. (Her first under that pseudonym,* A Dark-Adapted Eye, *won the Edgar for best mystery novel published in the U.S. in 1986—and her* Live Flesh *won the Gold Dagger for best mystery novel published in the U.K. in 1986.) The real wonder is that she finds time to write short stories at all.*

He told his wife when Susanna was coming and said the best thing would be for her to go out.

"I'll kill her before she walks through that door," his wife said . . .

DYING HAPPY

by RUTH RENDELL

I was sitting by his bedside. He had a pure white room all to himself.

"This place reminds me of something that happened to a friend of mine."

"What friend?" I said.

"You didn't know him. He's dead now, anyway. Or dead to all intents and purposes." He gave me a sly sideways look. It was a look that dared me to ask what that last remark meant. I didn't ask and he said, "I'll tell you about him." He put his head back on the pillow and looked at the white, white ceiling. "A long time ago, twenty years at least, he had a relationship with this woman."

I had to interrupt. "Oh, come on," I said. "I have a relationship with you. Come to that, I have a relationship with the milkman."

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"Well—an affair, then. I hate the word, too. I picked it up from Miriam." Miriam was his wife. "An affair," he said. "A love passage. He was married, of course. But he was in love with this woman, about as much in love as anyone can be, I gather. Fathoms deep. He was a very romantic man. He didn't tell his wife, but of course she found out and put a stop to it."

"What was her name?" I said.

"The girl friend? Susanna. Her name was Susanna. She wasn't any younger than his wife or better-looking or cleverer or anything. And none of them were young, you know. Even then, at the time, they weren't young. I said he put a stop to it but that was only for a while. They started up again in secret and this time when the wife found out, Susanna herself stopped it. She said it wasn't fair to any of them and she didn't answer his phone calls or his letters and after a while it sort of petered out as these things do. Anyway, this was all of twenty years ago, as I said.

"His wife would bring up Susanna's name every time they disagreed. You can imagine. And he wasn't above comparing his wife unfavorably with Susanna if she annoyed him. But after a time they stopped mentioning her, though my friend never stopped thinking about her. He said that never a day passed without him thinking of her. And she came into his dreams. He got to look forward to those dreams because he said, at least that way he got to see her sometimes."

"The poor devil," I said.

"Yes, well, he was romantic."

It was nearly as white outside as in. There was snow on the ground and lumps of snow on the tree branches. He turned his face to the dazzling snow, screwing up his eyes. "He got some awful thing the matter with him. I'm speaking about the present day now, more or less. They gave him a limited time to live, a matter of months—you know how they won't commit themselves. He got it into his head he had to see Susanna before he died. He had to see her, he could die happy or at least contented if he could see her."

"Did he know where she was?" I said.

"Oh, yes, he knew. You have to understand that though they never spoke of her, he and his wife, he knew all about her, everything that had happened to her. He knew she had moved and that she had married. It was an agony to him when she married. He knew the day and the hour and he sat watching the clock. Her husband died and he tried not to rejoice. He sent anonymous flowers, not for her

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dead husband but to her. That was the only contact, if contact it can be called, between them in all those years. Now to see her again was an obsession with him. He dreamed of it, he thought of nothing else.

"His wife had said she'd do anything for him, anything he wanted she'd try to get him. 'Get me Susanna,' he said. 'I want to see Susanna before I die.' Well, that wasn't at all what she'd meant by anything he wanted. You can imagine. She shouted and wept and said if Susanna came there—he was at home then, he went into hospital later—if Susanna came, she'd kill her. 'Oh, grow up,' he said. 'The way you dramatize everything! We're all old now, we can't do anything. Look at me, be reasonable, why d'you grudge me a bit of happiness? I won't trouble you for long.'

" 'You're my husband,' she said, 'you're mine. It's me you ought to want to see.'

" 'God knows I see you every minute of every day,' he said.

" 'I'll pull the phone wires out of the wall,' she said. 'If you write to her, I won't post the letter. I'll burn any letter you write to her. And if you get her here, I'll kill her. I'll hit her over the head like I would a burglar if I caught him in my house.' "

He was staring hard at me now and breathing rather quickly. The white glare on his face made him look like death.

"Take it easy," I said.

"I will. I am." He managed a grin. "It wasn't only his wife he saw. The neighbors used to come in. And his friends from the old days. He got one of them to post the letter. And Susanna answered by return of post. There was no question of his wife keeping the letter from him—she couldn't tell who his letters were from. That letter made him so happy. He had waited twenty years for it, he felt he could have died he was so happy. And maybe it would have been for the best if he had. Maybe it would.

"He phoned her, he spoke to her, they fixed a time for Susanna to come. Hearing her voice was another kind of ecstasy. He told his wife when she was coming and said the best thing would be for her to go out.

" 'I'll kill her before she walks through that door,' his wife said. I don't think I said they'd never met, did I—Susanna and his wife? Well, they never had, never even heard each other's voice on the phone. Of course, he didn't believe his wife would kill her. I mean, would you? No one would. He didn't even believe she'd do Susanna an injury."

"What happened when Susanna came?" I said.

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The hospice was set in parkland. Cedar trees stood very black and ragged against the snow. You could see visitors' cars approach from the time they entered by the distant gate. He was watching a car worm its way along the road between the snow banks.

"He heard her come to the door and he waited. It was ages before she came up. And when she did, his wife was with her. Susanna was changed, but he didn't mind that—they were all changed, how could it be otherwise? She didn't touch him, she didn't even touch his hand. She and his wife sat there talking across him. They talked about the books they read and knitting and painting in water colors and golf—he'd never realized they had so much in common. They even looked alike. After a while, they went downstairs. Susanna came again next day, but she only looked in on him for two minutes. She and his wife had dinner together downstairs and watched the gardening program on television. The day after that he went into a hospice rather like this one."

"This friend," I said, "it was you, wasn't it?"

"How did you know?"

"It always is," I said. "And I suppose I posted that letter for you."

He nodded, looking very tired now. The door opened and two women came in—big, florid Miriam with a fur hat on her red hair and a fur coat that made her look like a marmalade cat and zip-up boots, and another one like a tortoiseshell cat, as furry and booted but a fraction taller. Miriam introduced me.

"We mustn't stay long, darling. We're learning Italian and we've got our lesson at two. We're planning on Rome together for Easter so there's no time to waste. Give him the chocolates, Susanna, and then we must rush. If the snow clears tomorrow, we'll be on the golf course all weekend, so I don't suppose we'll see you again till Monday."

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a distinguished reprint by

ELLEN GILCHRIST

This story from Ellen Gilchrist's fine collection of short stories, Drunk with Love, *raises some thoughts about the "criminal as victim" as well as some complex questions (ask any lawyer or psychiatrist).*

Such as, are scenes of the crime as randomly chosen as they often appear to be? At what point does a neurotic obsession become psychotic? What is the legal redress for the families of victims of such a crime as JeanAnne Lori Mayfield's . . . ?

THE LAST DIET

by ELLEN GILCHRIST

On the twenty-fourth day of August, nineteen hundred and eighty-five, JeanAnne Lori Mayfield, third child and only daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Johnny Wayne Mayfield of Fayetteville, Arkansas, ended her last and final diet by running her navy-blue Toyota sedan into a doughnut shop. She could have swerved the other way and hit the emergency entrance of the Washington County General Hospital, but, no, she plowed into the front window of Daytime Doughnuts, Number Three, killing a waitress, an overweight professor of English at the university, and herself. Goodbye, JeanAnne Lori, we will miss you. Goodbye, Aurora Gilbreath. We'll miss you, too. Goodbye, Professor Bright. Wasn't it you who always used to say, "When you're hungry, eat; when you're sleepy, sleep. Pass the cornbread."

Once, when he was younger, Professor Bright had been married to a redhaired graduate student who had borne him a son. A thin, redheaded boy named Teddy who loved books and who had spent his life, up to the time of the crash at Daytime Doughnuts, reading

From Drunk with Love. *Copyright © 1986 by Ellen Gilchrist.*

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anything he could get his hands on. He was reading a book when the phone rang to tell him of the tragedy. He closed the book, laid it on a table, and hurried to the hospital to identify the body.

The worst thing of all for Teddy Bright was that he knew everyone involved. He knew his father and lived down the street from him. He knew Aurora Gilbreath and had purchased doughnuts from her many a morning on his way to work. He knew JeanAnne Lori and had been in the room with her many times, at restaurants around town, or at the Kinko's Copy Place where she worked. Teddy even knew where JeanAnne Lori lived.

She lived across the street from the park, in a small white house facing a castle built by a local sculptor with a National Endowment grant. It was a castle made of concrete and stone, of rocks and mussel shells, of old earrings and clay tiles with strange runes engraved on them. The castle was used as an example of how grant money is wasted on useless projects, but no one tore it down, and never a day went by that there wasn't a meeting between lovers or a picnic or a birthday party taking place on its turrets and battlements and towers. JeanAnne Lori's house faced the castle and Teddy had delivered many a pizza to her door during the years when he was working his way through college. It would be a Combination Deep-Dish or an International or a Madrid.

Now, here was Teddy, standing in JeanAnne Lori's yard, trying to believe his father was dead. He hung his head. It could not be true. His father stretched out on an undertaker's table. JeanAnne Lori, dead and to blame. There was her house, being sat in by her friends. He went inside, and was comforted and given a glass of tea.

"Would you like to see her room?" her friend Stella said. "She left everything in perfect order." Teddy was led back through a narrow hall to JeanAnne Lori's room. A spotless white rug was on the floor. A white coverlet with puffs of pink cotton was on the bed. Pillows with pink and white shams. Five Care Bears lined up on the pillows. Share Bear, Cheer Bear, Friend Bear, Good Luck Bear, Brave Heart Bear. A white-enamel table held JeanAnne Lori's Bible and her diary and a vase of artificial flowers. Teddy picked up the Bible. "I'll leave you here to meditate," Stella said. As soon as she was gone, Teddy put the Bible down and picked up the diary and put it in his pocket. Then he walked back down the hall and told Stella goodbye and went across the street to the castle and up a path to

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a turret room that looked out on the baseball diamond. He opened the book and began to read.

A DIET JOURNAL, by J. L. Mayfield, age 38

I begin this diet as no other diet. This time I will win. This time I will not be tempted by anything to stop short of my goal. It took a long time to gain this weight. It is going to take a long time to lose it. Now, get up, weigh myself. Go on. I gained it. Now I must pay.

Later: 148. Oh, my God!

APRIL 2, 1985

Five glasses of water—all vitamins—some lettuce and egg white, some diet rice cakes—three or four—I can't remember exactly. One chicken breast. No. I will not eat another bite all day. I will lie down and imagine myself very very very thin. I am wearing a soft white dress and leaning on somebody's arm. He is going to take me to the show I think. I will drink one Diet Coke—that is absolutely all.

APRIL 3

Today is the day I will have to really think straight and everything. My body is resisting being hungry. The body is not on your side in anything. Sex or diet. I must always keep that first in my mind above all other things and defeat it with my mind. The mind is stronger than the body if it wants to be.

APRIL 4

I will not get down or mad at myself if I slip and eat one cookie or even a milk shake in a moment of weakness. I will never see my waist again unless I start right now. I will be in a sea of fat. It will surround my natural beauty like a lake. So there is nothing to do now but charge ahead.

Think of all that fat around my heart and liver if I should ever have to get an operation. Of course, so far I have been in perfect health all my life, but you never can tell. Yes, I think I am on my way to a body any woman could be proud of. Yes, this time I will win at the losing game.

Later: I have had a strange spell of weakness. It was the first time I ever felt weak in my life. I could not get up off the floor. I called the Weight Engineers and they said not to worry, it is only my body

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wanting some food. I will drink some more water and lay on the floor and wait it out.

JUNE 18

Dear Diet Diary, I have not been writing in you because I have been in the hospital. I drained all the potassium out of my body and had an electrolyte imbalance. I am sorry that happened as it was a major diet setback and I have gained back all the weight I lost that wonderful week of starvation and now I have to start all over again. The Weight Engineers said not to get excited about it, that doctors always want to blame things on women starving themselves when that wasn't it at all. It was the heat and the long sunbaths I was taking to give myself something to do while I was starving. I have to go back to work tomorrow so it will not be easy to diet properly at the store, but I will make it one way or the other.

JUNE 19

First I have to get out all my clothes and lay them on the bed and pick out something beautiful I want to wear on the first of September. By the first of September I will be a size 8 or die. That is absolutely that. I have had it with being the size of a house. I want a new boy friend and a good social life and I will never get it until I conquer the layers of fat that have come like a terrible parasite to nest on my rib cage and my hips and my arms. I must be very clear about my goals now.

1. My goal is to be a size 8 by September 1.
2. My immediate goal is to be a size 12 by the first of August. This means I have to be a person who can live on 700 calories a day and not complain.

I must think of a lot of interesting things to do around town and not forget to let my friends help me. They may be secretly jealous when they see my rib cage and slim hips emerging from the mountain of fat cells that hold them captive. Let them be jealous. That's their problem.

JUNE 27

My advisers at Weight Engineers say that I am the best dieter (diet student) they have had. I don't give up just because I have a few setbacks. I know what I want and I will make the sacrifices to get it. They are going to give me a free week's counseling to make up for having to go to the hospital.

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When I have reached my goal of 125 pounds, then I will make a video tape for them about how I did it and they can play it for other people. It feels so good to be on my way to success in the diet field.

I would a lot rather be skinny than go get some sweet rolls for breakfast. Look at it this way, sweet rolls are just going to last a few minutes. A good body will be with me always.

Teddy looked up. Some children were playing on the castle. They were on the bridge, dropping rocks into the moat. A girl caught his eye, then reached down and scratched her behind. She was a dirty, wild-looking, fat little blonde girl. Teddy decided he loved her. I hope when you grow up you never think you are fat, he was thinking. I hope you never hear the word. He turned the page of the diary. From August 3 to August 14 was blank. August 14 was written in sharp black printing, as if the writer were leaning the weight of the universe against the pen.

AUGUST 14

I begin again. Nothing to lose but my self-esteem completely if I don't. I have been driving down Mission Road so my car would never go by the shopping center where they have my darling angel Weight Engineers, who have helped me so much. Why did I give up short of goal? Just because my potassium got low and I got sick *one* day and my arm was a little bit numb. Is that any reason to give up the only diet I ever went on that was going to be successful? It was successful. I still am twelve pounds below where I started in April. I have lost twelve pounds forever and I will lose ten more. I weigh 136 and my goal is 125 and I will get there. I am in control again. I am so happy. I sat over on the castle this morning and thought about Frank Williams, who built it with his own hands when he lived here. I used to see his old truck pull up full of stones. Now this monument to him is here forever. My diet will be like that. A few stones to carry each day, then my castle will stand there before my eyes. My body will be perfect as God and nature intended it to be.

Teddy sighed. It was too sad. The world was just too much to bear. He lay his head against the tiles in the turret wall. Heavenly music began to play. Heavenly music coming for to carry him home. He

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looked up. It was the ice-cream truck turning the corner by the swimming pool. A red-and-white-striped truck with a carousel on top. The horses on the carousel were freshly painted. They whirled around and around as the truck moved down the hill playing Strauss waltzes to a calliope beat. The children left the bridge and ran to the corner to watch it go by. Teddy went back to JeanAnne Lori's diary.

AUGUST 15

I have just purchased a set of doctor's scales. They take up half my bathroom. I dreamed of them last night. I am not sleeping very well without food but it's all right. When I wake up I walk around the house and think about how good I'm going to look. It won't be long now. Twenty more days of hunger and it will all be over.

Later: Some headaches this afternoon, nothing special. Took some aspirin and a Tylenol I borrowed from Angela Jamesison. You have to put up with a few inconveniences. Also, foot getting numb when I set in one position for more than a few minutes. Nothing to worry about.

AUGUST 16

I bought a diet placemat at the health-food store. It has 33 different diets and six fasts. It is great. Just reading it makes me know it is possible to get thin if I want to enough and don't get sidetracked and think I have to be thin to get a boy friend. The point of getting thin is for my own self-esteem and to love myself and so forth.

It is the wrong approach to a diet to think that at the end you will have some wonderful boy friend who will change the world. Monique, my weight counselor, says that is the thing that makes everyone gain back weight after they struggled so hard to lose it. They get thin, then nothing happens in the romance department, so they give up and go back to eating. That will not happen to me because I know about it beforehand.

The placemat cost $4.98 and is copyrighted so you can't tell the diets to anyone without permission. There is one that gives you six animal crackers for a reward every night. That goes along with something Monique was telling me. She said the body will not live without pleasure. So you have to be very good to yourself while you are starving and have other pleasures like making your yard beautiful or getting a new shower curtain. Or talking to your friends.

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AUGUST 17

I am nearing my goal. Yesterday my arm got numb again while I was cleaning out a closet. I think I might be catching something. I keep having this light get in my eye. I don't want to say anything about it because they might make me stop the diet. I need the diet. The diet is the best thing that ever happened to me. Before I went on the diet I didn't know who I was. I didn't have a sense of purpose. I just got up in the morning and went to work and came home. I could not plan a future for myself. Well, nothing will stop me now.

The people at Weight Engineers have made me Dieter of the Month. I am going to have my picture in their newsletter and maybe in the national Weight Engineers' magazine. It is a good thing I am keeping this diary. I think there will come a time when it will be a very important document.

Well, that's about all for now. I have to eat lunch and then go get weighed in. Oh, yes, every day as I turn off the highway to go to the Weight Engineers office I have to pass right by the doughnut shop. It is wonderful to see fat people going in to get their sugar and caffeine fix when I know that I am on my way to clearer goals and better thinking.

AUGUST 19

I have had a setback caused by listening to the radio. There was this woman from Georgia and she said she and her friends had started a club called Bored Of The Fat and every time one of them decided to go on a diet or spend money on diet camps or diet food or anything like that they called a meeting and sat down with a box of cookies and some Häagen Dazs ice cream and reminded each other of how beautiful the world is and how much fun it is to eat things.

They shouldn't put things like that on the air. I went right down to the grocery and pigged out. It was all that woman's fault. I am going to write the station.

Now, I must call Monique and get back in control. I will get back in control. I will be in control.

AUGUST 20

What next? I shouldn't even write this down but I saw Josephine Wethers today and she looked like hell. She has been going to Diet Jail, as we call Weight Engineers for a joke, for four months now and at first she looked real good, but now she looks like a person who went to Dachau or something. I was shocked when I ran into

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her. All the way home I kept thinking I might be thin enough already and not know it. I weigh 128, the least I have ever weighed except when I had pneumonia. I don't know what to think or do sometimes. All the way home I kept thinking about how thin and gaunt her face looked. What if I look like that and no one tells me? I wouldn't have told her for anything. Imagine me walking up to her and saying, Josephine, you look terrible.

Exercise, that's the key. Maybe I should start running again. But all it does is make me hungrier and hungrier. I know it's muscle weight, but it still depresses me to see it on those damn old scales.

Maybe I should throw the scales away. Oh, no, never say that. They are only science, remember Monique said they are only the measurement of what we are attempting to do. Oh, God, I'll always be fat. I can't defeat it. I don't know what to do.

Later: I am in control. I went to Weight Engineers and talked to Monique and she said it was just a temporary setback and to forget the milk shake I drank last night and the cheese and crackers and think about the future when I will be a size 8 and ready for romance. I don't know where that's going to be in Fayetteville. Maybe there's somewhere to go in Rogers.

AUGUST 21

I have failed again. Last night I ate two Lean Cuisines and half a pound of Weight Engineers Rye Thins. I gained another pound. Now I am back up to 129 and only two days ago I was 127. I was two pounds from my goal and I messed it up by being weak. I remind myself of my mother. That is what she would do when she was mad. Just eat another bag of potato chips and give some to me. Not to mention ice-cream cones. There is no hope for me. I have tried everything but having my intestines shortened by surgery. I need to get my mind on something besides myself. There must be something to cheer me up.

Wait a minute! This is my Weight Diary. No place to feel sorry for myself. I must get hold of myself. Drink eight glasses of water. And some lemon juice and parsley. I will get this under control if it's the last thing I ever do in my life.

AUGUST 23

I have started a fast. For fourteen hours I have not had a thing to eat but water and four ounces of orange juice. I will write in this book every hour until I weigh 125. Where I really want to be.

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12:00 Water
1:00 Water
1:35 Going to bed
3:15 Can't sleep
4:00 Took one of the Demerols I saved when Mama was sick
9:40 Good sleep. Drank two eight-ounce glasses of water.
12:00 Four ounces of orange juice. I'm feeling weak but that's to be expected the first day. Will meditate.
8:00 Walked five miles, drank water, swam 18 laps. Drank four ounces of orange juice.
10:00 Going to bed
11:35 Can't sleep
3:00 Still can't sleep. Have cleaned the whole house. Will take the other Demerol.

AUGUST 24, 6:00 A.M.

I am into a wonderful state of fast now. I am very clear. I remember when I took that class in Zen Buddhist scriptures from Doctor Bright at the university and he told us about the states the enlightened men would go into from not eating sometimes for days. I think I might be getting into one of those. I feel like something real important is happening to me. Like I am in the middle of real important events. It is like falling in love or when my niece, Lori Louise, was born and I rode around all night on my bicycle because Sally and Jimmy had named her for me. I think I should be a painter and paint all the glorious things I have been seeing on my fast. There is one small problem.

I have had a headache but took some aspirin and also my right arm got numb, but it is fine now. Also, I could not see to read. The brain is a funny thing and will have to adjust to this new state of affairs. 125. Here I come.

Idea. As soon as the stores open I will go out to the mall and look at all the beautiful clothes I will be buying as soon as I am at goal. I called Monique and she said to come by and let her monitor me since fasting is not a regular part of Weight Engineers diets and she is only letting me do it because I am frantic.

Well, sayonara for now.

The rest of the pages were blank. Teddy closed the book. The children had come to the moat below the turret and were fishing for

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crawdads. A boy came running out from inside the dungeon. He had a huge crawdad between the thumb and index finger of his right hand and he was holding it out toward the little blonde girl. She began to scream, a wonderful bloodcurdling scream. The boy laughed and withdrew the crawdad. The girl screamed some more.

A van pulled into the parking lot and unloaded a Little League baseball team. Music was playing in the background. The ice-cream truck was circling back around. Teddy took two one-dollar bills out of his pocket and laid them on a bench beside the moat. "Here's some money," he said. "Go over there and get some ice cream when I'm gone. It's all right. I'm only putting this here because I'm sad."

The children backed off. "It's all right to take the money when I'm gone," he added. He left the money on the bench and walked back across the street in the direction of JeanAnne Lori's house. I have to decide what to do about everything now, he was thinking. I have to make decisions. He looked around. There was a trash container beside an elm tree. He dropped the diary in and walked back to his car.

Behind him the little girl picked up the money from the bench and began to run in the direction of the painted horses on the painted truck.

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Asked for some information about himself, EQMM first-story author #648, David Justice, wrote us:

"Dave Justice is in the etymology racket with the notorious Webster gang of Springfield, Mass. He's also coming out with a yawner about some pointy-head stuff (The Semantics of Form in Arabic) *later this year. When he's not out roughing up plug-uglies he's usually playing with his kid or writing down the memoirs of his good friend Murphy . . ."*

I DON'T DO DIVORCE CASES

by DAVID JUSTICE

When he come through the door, I don't know is he on the level or out to lunch. He looks around, he looks around some more, then he looks straight at me. He says he wants me to locate this dame who's missing. Okay, fine, but then he gives me an address where I'll find her at ten o'clock that night. I say I don't do divorce cases—I say that just to have something to say while I'm figuring what his game is. He says he isn't married to her and he isn't related to her. He just wants me to find her and learn everything I can about her. I figure the guy's a fruitcake, but he flashes a roll of bills at me and I figure my diet can stand some fruit. He's on, at twice the going rate.

Does this dame have a name? I begin, smiling. She does, but you don't need to know it yet, he says. Wants my first impressions to be free of associations. Great. How will I recognize her? He gives me a photograph, says, Memorize it, then burn it. No kidding, that's what he says. And I must admit she is one good-looking dame. Early twenties, but not so early there's any problem with the law. Dark-haired. Eyes a little out of focus, or maybe it's the camera. Then he thinks better of it and snatches it back, says I've seen enough. He's

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right, I have. Maybe he figures I wouldn't burn it. He's right, I wouldn't.

The address turns out to be a loft in an artsy part of the city. I show up a little early. I figure it'll be a little strange, me just bursting in on her, but there's no problem. The room is huge, there's some sort of party going on. Already lots of bodies and I just walk in real confident and nobody challenges. The blonde who opened the door wasn't doing it for me, anyway—she was just leaving the party to shoot up or be sick.

I'm dressed like a P.I. It doesn't matter. I don't exactly fit right in, but in this zoo I don't stick out. You got people dressed like Philip Marlowe, you got people dressed like Tarzan—before the party's over, you got people that they're not dressed at all.

Lots of bodies and some not bad broads, some of what are probably really men. No sign of the little lady. I grab a drink and wait.

Ten o'clock comes on and in walks the hot property. Right, you couldn't mistake her, but even so that snapshot oughta be shot for treason. Good-looking and what she is are just different ballparks. It's like trying to photograph a waterfall, or a moving cloud. Murphy, you're getting sloppy, but I mean really. Less and less am I blaming the guy.

This first trip, he said, no specifics. Just a general idea of what she drinks and who she talks to. And I'm supposed to get a bead on what she's really like. I watch, she doesn't see me watching her. At eleven, she leaves alone.

I meet my party at midnight in the diner like he said. He is sitting at a table, smoking. Cup of coffee, untouched. He is, how do I say it, unsentimental. He gives me these narrow eyes.

"Well?"

I tell him all I know about her. "Drinks plain vermouth, not a whole lot of it. Seems to know everyone, but only talks to a few. One guy particular seemed interested but she wasn't interested back. She left alone."

"Did you follow her?"

"You didn't tell me to."

He relaxes a little. "Good, good. I like your action, Murphy. Here's for tonight."

He rounds it off, upwards. Then he gives me another address for tomorrow, mid-afternoon . . .

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He might've said what it was, save me going around peering at all these street numbers where half the joints don't have any. Turns out it's the public library, f'r cr'sakes. I go in, this time feeling really out of place. I start browsing, so-called. Then I notice what I'm browsing—Young Adult Romance—and move off in disgust. I grab a novel off the shelves and make like I'm reading it. In she comes.

Now she's dressed simple, but she's even more beautiful. Even better without makeup—anyhow, none I can detect. She moves easily through the rows of books. Her slender hand selects a volume. A sad smile plays on her lips and, oh, Murphy, now you're talking like one. Just stay *professional*, you're not hitched up with this girl.

She settles on something and goes to the circulation desk. I go up behind her with whatever it is I've got and I get a gander at what she's checking out. Something about a swan in love. Sounds kinky, but this isn't the kind of place for that. As she heads for the door, I hand the librarian my book and gaze after her. I'm not supposed to follow her, but I stand at the glass doors and watch her go tripping down the steps and out of my life forever. Oh, Murphy, you've got it bad. But I don't go anywhere because I don't have a card. I'm stuck at the counter, feeling like a fool, and the librarian is very nice and says it's all right, will I just give my name and address and they can let me have the book on a temporary card.

I meet him at a luncheonette. This time he pays me before I even report. When he hears about the swan book, he gets real excited and says, Yes, that's just exactly right, things are going perfectly. Then he gives me another address for that very night.

I say, You seem to know a lot about this dame, always knowing where she's going to be. Not always, he says sternly, and there's a lot he doesn't know.

That night turns out to be the theater. Maybe he saw her buy tickets, there's some good explanation. Anyhow, he has one for me in the row behind her. I watch the actors. The play is hard to follow, but I watch her responses. It goes on like this all evening. Lots and lots of reaction shots, only shot from behind.

I meet him at a deli near the theater. "What can I tell you? She liked the play."

He seemed pleased. "She has good taste." Then he surprises me and asks if I liked it.

"What play was it?" I ask him.

Again he seems pleased . . .

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The next day I follow her shopping, writing down everything she buys. After that it's an art museum. I'm supposed to say how long she spends at each painting, does she talk to anyone, does she look at any of them twice.

He studies the purchase list, frowning, but clears up when I tell him she charged it. I'm guessing maybe she's getting in over her head and could use his dough. She spent different times at different paintings, and let me tell you it was a pain going back and getting all the names.

No, she didn't talk to anyone, just to ask the guard something, like maybe where's the bathroom. Yes, she went back to one painting. What was it? Just a bunch of nothing, the title claimed water lilies—his head tilts back and he kisses his own fingers, blows a little air.

Somehow this gets to me and I say if he's so keen on her why don't *he* follow her? Why don't he go *up* to her?

He comes back to earth fast and starts frowning and says, You don't ask the questions—but the way he says it I can see he's shaken and I figure he's really just a little afraid of her. If you weren't just paid to do it and you really wanted her, I can see where a guy would freeze up.

Only then I get another idea and I'm thinking how he's maybe some kind of prevert and he really wants to bump her off. Only why would he want to do that? Anyhow, just keep your mitts off her, I almost say.

He glowers at me and I glower at him and he hands me another address, but I say I'm busy that day. Oh, you're busy that day, are you—real sarcastic, but he doesn't press the point. Okay, meet me at such and such a place at 10:00 P.M., anyway, and he'll have a different address. Okay.

I got back to my apartment and shower and have a TV dinner and don't finish it. I can't get the address out of my mind. I lay awake a while and then decide I'm going there, anyway. I fall asleep eventually. Crazy dreams.

It's a kind of stadium, next to the middle of nowhere. Weeds are growing up through the marble and you can tell it was really something once, but they must of screwed up because it's coming apart now, in bits and pieces, here and there. She walks slowly around the high part of it and I stand watching her and not moving. If she sees me, she doesn't show it. Then she leaves . . .

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That night at the diner, he gives the narrow-eye treatment and I'm gruff so as not to be nervous. He hands me an address and says, Don't try to pull anything. I tell him he minds his business and I mind mine. He says that's a laugh, and it is, because I'm minding her business and he's buying mine.

This time it's a restaurant. Fancy place, but she's dining alone. I take a table not far from her. Not professional, Murphy, you could of seen her just as good from across the room.

She has a glass of wine and a cheese plate—then some kind of mixed-up stuff I don't know its name. Bad luck—I already got my steak or I coulda said I'll have what she's having and found out. Anyway, she has water with it, then salad, then some green stuff in a little glass.

I go to my drop and just read out the menu in a bored voice like a sergeant who for some reason he's a short-order cook. Wine, cheese, whatever, water, salad. I stop. He waits. He looks at me. Well?

Well what? How about my dollars?

The man is not buying it. You're holding out on me, he says.

Like splat I'm holding out on you. Don't gimme that. She didn't see anyone. I didn't talk with her. Whachoo looking at me that way for?

You haven't told me everything.

Yes—I did everything. Just sat alone and ate, not much—and not much wine at all. One glass, plus a glass of some greenish stuff.

Some greenish stuff, he says, very polite. I'm ready to bust him if he's getting sarcastic, but now he relaxes. Absinthe, he murmurs like he's talking to himself. He gets this far-off look. I say, What gives? He comes back to our planet and he pays me, he actually smiles.

He gives me an address for eleven o'clock at night. It's just a sidewalk in front of a record store that's closed. A traffic light, going through the motions—hardly any traffic. An alleyway with garbage cans.

But she shows up, all right. She comes across the street and mails a letter. I step out of the shadows. She puts her hand to her mouth, stifles a scream. I put my hands out, palms forward, like, Lady, don't blame me. She speaks—for the first time I hear her really speak clearly. "What are you following me for?"

And, damn, I just don't have an answer. I move toward her. My

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head I think it's going from side to side, the mouth is moving but isn't saying anything. She steps backward, looking afraid.

And then the guy shows up, Mr. Mystery Employer. She looks at him and my jaw drops, because she's only a little bit surprised and now she's less scared. "Why, Charles, what are you doing here?"

He smiles, really debonair, and takes her hand.

"This man has been following me," she says, and she points at me. I'm a big guy but it stops me dead in my tracks.

"Oh, he has, has he?"

He turns on me and he's about six inches shorter and has this topcoat on and he's not in condition like I am, but he's got me where he wants me and he's a lot better shaved.

"I catch you around this lady again and I'll clean the pavement with you, you understand? Now beat it."

Now *I'm* walking backward and my mouth is moving, but nothing's coming from the brain. Then I turn and I start cursing myself under my breath and walk back to the subway. The last thing I hear him say is: "Come on, darling, I'll take you home."

The next day I get a check in the mail for my time plus a goodbye sweetener. He signs off wishing me the best of luck. That's the last I ever saw of him.

"Q"

DETECTIVERSE

PUSHOVER

by JEAN DOBBS

Her body lay sprawled at the foot of the cliff.
One push had caused that situation.
Although with light laughter he'd asked her to stroll,
It had been a grave invitation.

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If you like solitude, you'll like the part of East Anglia up near the Wash. But there is that old wives' tale about crabs dining off drowned fishermen.

Mary Reed is the pen name of an Englishwoman who has been in the U.S. since 1976 and was, as she likes to say, a Bicentennial bride. She has another story soon to be published in Tempest Review *and an earlier story was read over BBC, but this is her first professionally* published *fiction . . .*

LOCAL CUISINE

by MARY REED

I was working in the garden shed, mixing up some fertilizer, when Duncan came home with the bad news. It seemed that Ezekiel McPherson had invited himself over to dinner that night and, what's more, had actually had the brass nerve to specify what kind of dish he'd be expecting to eat!

Let me make it plain right away. I didn't like Ezekiel from the start. As a Scot myself, I really don't care too much for foreigners wearing the tartan, and even a cow would have laughed to see someone who claimed—in accents of the purest Missouri sort—to have descended from the McPhersons standing there in the dark tartan of the Robertson clan. And in the form of *trews!* But in fairness, I must admit that I wasn't really prepared to take to the man who, with the casting vote on the new board of directors of the company which had acquired the local plant, turned down his thumb on plans to expand the facility, and indeed was talking of shutting the whole place down—and Duncan only two years away from retirement. Not to mention all the other people who would be thrown out of a job in an area which hasn't much to offer by way of alternative employment.

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Perhaps you don't know East Anglia. It's that bit which bulges out above London, and must be one of the last truly wild places in England. In the winter it looks bleak, and so it is—endless miles of flat, dark land (wonderful for growing vegetables and soft fruit) separated by drainage dikes, and never a tree to be seen. Of course, with all the water, sailing is popular, and there's a bit of tourism along the coast. Fishing, too, does well. Yarmouth bloaters are famous, and so are Cromer crabs. However, up near the Wash, which is where we live (and which is, incidentally, the place where bad King John was supposed to have lost the Crown Jewels), there isn't much except the land, the sea, and the plant itself.

If you like solitude, then you'll like our area. And Duncan loves to sail, so he's happy. He usually gets his boat out and goes fishing for crabs at the weekend—he's extraordinarily fond of that particular shelled beasty, though I never eat it. It sounds a bit silly, but I've never been able to get that old wives' tale about crabs dining off drowned fishermen out of my head—puts me off the dish completely. Duncan, though, pooh-poohs the whole thing and eats every one he catches.

Which brings me back to the question of the dinner. Apparently, Ezekiel, who was on a sort of fact-finding mission around all the European holdings of the parent company, had scarcely set foot into the plant when he discovered Duncan was what he termed a fellow Scot—all this, Duncan related, being said in what Ezekiel fondly imagined was a Scottish accent—and insisted on coming along to meet "the wee wife." I said if he wanted to meet me why hadn't he invited us to dinner at the Weatherman Inn, but Duncan said he hadn't and there wasn't really very much he could have done. And then the talk turned to the nagging question of the shutdown.

"I suppose there'll be severance pay," Duncan said, hanging up the spade and fork while I washed the chemicals off my hands. "And I'm sure we could manage until I get my pension. But I don't see how we could keep the boat." The latter was, of course, his pride and joy.

"It's the younger ones I feel sorry for," I said, "with their new mortgages and young children, and nowhere else to work unless they move away to one of the bigger towns."

"I don't think he'd really thought about it, to tell you the truth. It was all, I gathered, a matter of profit-and-loss and balance sheets and shareholders. No wonder he's got an ulcer."

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"Oh, did he tell you that as well? I wonder it's not caused by his conscience."

"No, he said he always likes to sample the local cuisine—"

"At the expense of the local plant managers' wives, no doubt!"

"Right. And it seemed that he had a rather too large portion of one of those French dishes—something with lashings of wine and such—earlier in the week and his stomach had flared up again."

I made an unsympathetic remark, and then said, "And speaking of stomachs, what am I supposed to give the wretch at this short notice?"

"Well, at least we have some nice early peas to give him. How about something just plain and sort of English?"

"And you a Scot! Away with you while I slave in the kitchen!"

Well, in the end I managed to put together quite a nice meal. It wasn't exactly the local cuisine—not a sign of fish, for one thing—but it did look very tempting on our best china.

There were several chops, mushroom gravy, a salad, the fresh peas, apple pie and thick cream to follow, and a wedge of Stilton and fruit to complete the festivities. Duncan had nipped down to the off-license while I was cooking and got a bottle of quite nice wine, most of which was consumed by our guest—to keep out the cold, he said. It was, indeed, foul weather, with the wind rising out of the east. It would be a stormy night out to sea, I thought. Not to mention inland.

Most of the wine being consumed by Ezekiel, by midnight he was as tight as a drum and getting uglier by the minute. I began to wonder when he would go home, since the people at the Weatherman Inn don't keep very late hours. Surely he didn't expect to sleep on the sofa in the front room? Just then, the wretch spoke.

"Let's go for a sail!" he cried, helping himself to the last of the wine. "Just the night for it—a nice stiff breeze! Just right!"

Duncan looked white about the gills. He pointed out that it was getting extremely windy and he didn't care much for night sailing at the best of times.

"Nonsense, man, where's your spirit?" cried Ezekiel, with that airy confidence of a man who probably hadn't been closer to the ocean than paddling in the surf at Coney Island or some such. "'Tang of the spray, wind in the ropes, song of the sea, all that stuff. Just the thing to get the old blood going."

My blood was certainly going, but not from the tang of the spray.

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I was angry at Ezekiel, but even angrier at Duncan, who, in the end—muttering something about how the wind seemed to be dying down—agreed to his request, if you could call it that.

Before they went out into the night, Ezekiel rang up the Inn and told them not to wait up for him, as he would be late back. They told him where the door key would be hidden and rang off. Duncan found him spare oilskins and off they went to the moorings. By then the wind had, in fact, died down, but there was still a sullen swell on the tide, which of course was just right for sailing out.

Rather like Canute, I wished the sea would reverse itself, but alas there was no stopping them. Just before they left, I drew Duncan aside and asked him what he'd do if his fellow sailor was suddenly stricken with a bad stomach.

"I'm hoping he will be," said Duncan. "Seasickness is a terrible thing." Sometimes he can be very obtuse.

So off they went and I settled down to wait for their return.

Duncan came in after dawn, looking worn out and grey, and somehow older. I could tell there was something wrong.

"Where's Ezekiel? I thought you'd be bringing him back for breakfast—though I don't suppose he'd fancy kippers."

Duncan looked like death.

"He's gone."

"Well, he'll be in time for breakfast at the Inn, I suppose. Would you like yours now?"

But Duncan wasn't hungry. He went up to catch a few hours' rest before he went off to the plant.

But of course Ezekiel never turned up again. Oh, the police came and questioned everyone in the place. Duncan, for a time, was prime suspect, he having been the last one to see Ezekiel alive. Apparently, the latter had decided to walk up from the moorings to the Inn and set off while Duncan was stowing the sails. But he never arrived at the Inn. Later on there was some talk about missing funds at the parent company and speculation that Ezekiel could have told the investigators quite a lot about them, but nothing was ever proved. Had he skipped with the cash, as the locals put it? It was never established.

As for the plant, the new chairman of the board had second thoughts and kept it open. Duncan retired two years later and we never spoke about our American visitor. And yet there were ques-

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tions that remained unanswered, too. I had only put enough fertilizer in Ezekiel's peas to give him a terrible stomach ache, or so I thought. I know it was a childish thing to do—and yet, had I put too much in and had Duncan had to dispose of a corpse? Indeed, had Duncan shoved the irritating drunk overboard in one of his rare flashes of temper? Neither of us asked the other, but I'm sure Duncan thought about it as much as I did.

I don't know if it's significant, but ever after, he wouldn't eat crabmeat. Said he'd gone off it. But I keep remembering that old wives' tale.

DETECTIVERSE

GIVING HIS BLOODY AWL

by WILLIAM C. THOMAS

In a tailor shop blood had been spilt
By a Scotsman's unfortunate lilt—
The tailor, named Saul,
Ran him through with an awl
When the customer asked to be kilt.

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a *NEW* short story by

JOHN F. SUTER

"But have you ever heard of this kind of thing before?" Victor asked Carlyle.

"I don't believe so."

"Would you agree they are nightmares? They are to me."

"I wouldn't enjoy them," Carlyle said. "However, they do seem to be more like nightmares' tails . . ."

NIGHTMARES' TAILS

by JOHN F. SUTER

After I'd had several encounters with the nightmares, I decided to discuss them with my friend, Carlyle Sanford, the psychologist. I stress that he is not a psychiatrist, because I didn't want help. I just thought this might be something different in his experience. It was.

I called on Sanford at home—a two-story of light-red brick, windows and doorways trimmed in stone. It's tastefully decorated, which is a marvel. Geraldine favors furniture that forbids you to associate with it; Carlyle is a freak for antiques.

Here I am in their high-key living room. Carlyle is off on the telephone, explaining some of the fine points of a motivation program he's developed for one of the newer high-tech industries. Geraldine has unwillingly permitted me to settle in one of the snowy armchairs. She is perched on the edge of its twin, fighting to keep a glower off her face. She'd be victorious if I were not the one who got away years ago. I know the signs.

Because I'm still at large, she must still cherish an unwarranted suspicion that I lead Carlyle astray. I am not a born leader.

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Geraldine: Is this a social call or business, Vic?

Victor: Not really either one, Gerry. I called Carlyle this afternoon. He expects me.

G: How intriguing. You must tell me what you mean by that.

V: I'll let Carlyle do it, if you don't mind. It's a bit personal, but if he wants to discuss it later, I'll not erect any barriers.

G: I see. You always were secretive, Vic.

V: Not secretive. Reserved.

G: Does Carlyle entrust his private affairs to you the way you seem to turn yours over to him?

V: Actually, we see very little of each other, and our contacts aren't that frequent. I merely have something that might interest him.

G: Something—or somebody?

V (ignoring the crudity): He might find it entertaining.

G: He thrives too much on entertainment as it is.

V: You certainly don't look either haggard or lackluster, Gerry. You still might make my pulse pound.

G: Might?

V: I'm more interested in the comfortable, friendly type these days.

G: One who can cook, among other things?

V: Cook? Oh, yes—that, too. Although they'd have to be Superchef to beat you, Gerry.

G: Nice of you to remember.

V: I remember better than you think. As a matter of fact, I want to ask you for something.

G: What is it?

V: You won't believe this, but I do ninety percent of the cooking when I'm at home. And I'm still fond of your version of velvet spice cake. Would you part with the recipe?

G: Why, Vic, how nice of you! Of course. Carlyle doesn't care much for it, and I hardly bake it any more.

V: Fine. I brought a blank card, just in case.

Carlyle (entering the room): Hello, Vic—sorry to keep you waiting. That was one call I couldn't put off.

V: No problem. I've been having a pleasant chat with Gerry. About cooking, in fact.

C: Well, why don't you and I step into my office and let you unburden yourself. Afterward, the three of us can reminisce about a variety of old topics.

G: I'll have the recipe for you when you're finished, Vic.

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V: I really appreciate it.

Carlyle's home office is called that for tax purposes, I suppose. Here he indulges his passion for antiques, except for his computer set-up, which is strung over a 700-year-old oak refectory table at one end of the room. Shelves all around are crammed with thick and thin stuff relating to his work. A beautifully preserved rolltop desk, also oak, is in the middle of the room under a Tiffany lamp, complete with fringe. In front of it, Carlyle is in his old oak swivel-chair, his feet propped on a pulled-out drawer—the lanky, charismatic intellectual, sandy and as hirsute as a Kennedy. I'm staring at a fainting couch, done in gleaming black leather, against the far wall from the visitor's chair, a platform rocker. If it's intended to put the visitor at ease, it succeeds.

C: Let me read your mind, Vic. You're wondering if I'm turning into a psychiatrist.

V: No. —That couch is new since I was here last.

C: In case you have any faint curiosity, it's for me when I want to indulge in a catnap. I found it in a new shop in Elm Grove.

V: If I'd had any thoughts, I'd have said it functioned as a casting couch.

C: Here? You malign me, old buddy.

V: I see you still have some of the things you bought from my father's estate.

C: Eh? Oh, this gorgeous paperweight. I hope you don't mind my storing pencils in his personal shaving mug.

V: Why should I? It's yours.

C: You came here because you want me to theorize about something?

V: I don't want you to theorize. I just thought you'd be interested in something I've been experiencing.

C: Something's been happening to you? What?

V: Have you ever heard of boring nightmares?

C: Boring nightmares?

V: Yes.

C: That's outside my experience. I'm not certain I've ever known it to be discussed. Tell me about it.

V: You know about the classic nightmare: the terror, the feeling of helplessness, the oppression, the sense of weight on the chest?

C: Yes.

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V: I used to get that kind. I'd tell myself, "This is illogical, wake up," and I would. And it would be gone.

C: Did you really? But tell me about the boring dreams.

V: The first time I noticed it, I was dreaming I was on some important project—what it was, I never knew. All I did know was that I had to get some object from some warehouse. I could have sent another person, but to speed things up I grabbed a cab to the warehouse. When I got there, I applied at the counter and was told by a faceless clerk—

C: An apt choice of words.

V: It's what he was. He told me I'd have to wait. I asked how long. He said he couldn't say. I asked him why. He shrugged, and I told him to call his supervisor. The supervisor showed up—a handsome Latin type, wearing white slacks, white shirt open at the collar, no tie. I told him what I wanted and the need for haste. He apologized and said, "My regrets, Senor, but we have just started an inventory of the entire warehouse. We cannot get what you want until we finish." I sputtered and felt lead in my stomach, knowing the building contained thousands of small items. Then I said to myself, "This isn't logical, wake up."

C: And you did?

V: Yes. Then I went back to sleep—and began to dream. Guess what? I was just arriving at the warehouse. And I got an exact replay, down to waking myself up. Want to guess what happened next?

C: Another replay?

V (nodding): Except that when I awoke the third time it was time to get up. So I did, feeling exhausted and more bored than I'd ever been in my life.

C: Something like the myth of Sisyphus—the man who rolled the rock uphill forever, but couldn't get it to stay there. Go on.

V: I only began thinking of it as a nightmare after the second one, several nights later. In that one, I was head of a company that made sausage. Good sausage. The best. Best taste, best purity, almost no fat. The only problem we had was we had to be approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Agriculture.

C: Why Pennsylvania? This isn't Pennsylvania.

V: I don't know, but that was the law. I don't know that "we" even sold there. But they not only tested our product for purity, they required us to make an eighty/twenty blend of our sausage with a control sausage. Brand X. Then it began to happen that our hundred-

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percent stuff was okay but the blend they demanded was showing serious traces of salmonella. I can still see my quality-control chief, a nice young fellow, coming in to tell me we'd been rejected. I told him to get on the phone and tell those turkeys to check out the Brand X they were sending us. "I did," he said, "but they wouldn't listen." At this point—

C: You woke yourself up.

V: And started all over. And woke again, and started over. The broken record.

C: Two things occur to me. In the warehouse dream, the head man was Latin. Were the other employees?

V: I'm not sure—I think so.

C: And you do your own cooking?

V: That's right.

C: The endless business at the warehouse might signify that you have a deep-seated feeling that Latins are the manana type, who keep putting off to tomorrow. The food situation might simply come from your seeing to-you-meaningless Approved By imprimaturs on food containers.

V: You could be right. I certainly don't think I have any Hispanic prejudices and I don't pay much attention to food labels, but you might be right about that, too. There was a third dream, Carlyle.

C: Tell me.

V: Well, it has a slight difference. In this one, I'm hard up for something to read and a friend gives me a copy of a suspense yarn that's selling like mad. I try it and find I can't get interested. It's an Emperor's New Clothes sort of situation—the author's trading on past successes and only putting words on paper. But people see me carrying the thing and say, "Oh, that's great, isn't it?" At this point, I wake up.

C: And two replays?

V: You got it. Except the third time I say to myself, "The hell with this." And I proceed to build the clever plot the author should have.

C: And?

V: And I wake up refreshed and bright-eyed.

C: Good for you.

V: But have you ever heard of this kind of thing before?

C: I don't believe so.

V: Would you agree they are nightmares? They are to me.

C: I wouldn't enjoy them. However, they do seem to be more like nightmares' tails.

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V: I think I recall reading at least one story—from long ago—where hell for two people was a dingy hotel room where they'd committed adultery.

C: The torture of the damned, I suppose.

V: Well, Carlyle, I won't take more of your time. I thought it might intrigue you. Do whatever you want with it. If you wish, leak to Gerry that I'm suffering from guilt over love unsanctified by marriage.

The three of us did take a while together, then as I was leaving, Gerry said, "Vic, here's that recipe."

"You're a sweetheart," I told her.

At least a week later there was a knocking at the door of my apartment on a Saturday morning. I opened the door, leaving the chain on, and saw two formidable-looking men regarding me.

"Mr. Pontz? Victor Pontz?"

"Yes."

"Police officers. We'd like to talk with you. May we come in?" Just like TV. They even showed me their shields.

I slipped the chain.

When you're watching this sort of thing on television, one of the two can be taller than the other, older than the other, heavier than the other. In this case, both were well built, case-hardened, and close in age—probably their mid-thirties. One wore a grey suit, one a blue. The latter said, "I'm Sergeant Miller. This is Detective Simmons."

I waved a hand toward the living room. "Please sit down."

Both of them sat in chairs facing the davenport. I sat, too—facing Detective Simmons.

Miller: Nice apartment, Mr. Pontz. —You're probably wondering why we're here.

V: Well, yes. I am. Could it be social?

Simmons: Not at this time of the year. We're not selling tickets.

M: Do you know a woman named Lucille Kahler?

V: No, I don't. The name's not familiar at all.

S: Lucille Kahler. She lived on Pine Street.

V: I'm sorry.

M: We have a picture of her. Maybe you knew her under a different name.

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V (studying picture): She's an attractive woman—but I don't know her.

S: She knew you.

M: Do you mind telling us where you were last night?

V: I was here from a quarter of six until now.

S: Anyone with you?

V: Not a soul. I fixed my own dinner, then I started work on a presentation. It kept me busy until after midnight. Then I went to bed. Why? Did something happen to this Kahler woman?

M: She was shot—killed.

V: And I'm in the classic spot. Alone, with nobody to confirm my actions. Except for two things—I didn't know her and I don't own a gun.

M: Mr. Pontz, what if I told you we have evidence?

V: You can put me at the scene? What time did it happen?

S: Sometime last night. She lived in a four-apartment building. Everyone else was out until close to eleven. Nobody heard the shot.

M: And it was fired through a pillow, so that it might or might not have been heard, anyway.

S: Mr. Pontz, you said you were working on a presentation. What does that mean?

V: I'm with Rhodes and Andrews Advertising. We're into a campaign for a client. I have to make the pitch to him. What evidence do you have against me?

M: Dave, maybe you'd better read him the Miranda.

Simmons read me from the card and reached for a paper bag beside him, took out a revolver sealed in a clear plastic bag, and set it on the coffee table.

M: Ever see that, Mr. Pontz?

V: An old .38 revolver—S and W?

S: You called it. Looks like you know it.

V: No. I've only seen the type.

M: You're sure of that?

V: Positive.

M: It's your gun, Mr. Pontz.

V: Nothing of the kind. I don't own a gun. I never have.

M: It's registered to you.

V: It can't be. Either somebody gave my name as an alias or you got the name wrong.

S (getting out his notebook): Victor J. Pontz. That's you?

V: Not necessarily. I'm Victor Joseph Pontz. (Thinks) I wonder.

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That must be an old registration. Victor Jerome Pontz was my father. He owned a gun like that.

M: He still alive?

V: No. He died nineteen years ago.

M: So although you didn't register the gun, it's still yours, part of your inheritance.

V: No—I sold nearly everything of his when the estate was cleared. I was the sole heir. I only kept his tools. The gun would have been sold.

S: To whom?

V: I can't tell you—I didn't keep a record. Maybe I can recall, but you'll have to give me time.

M: All right, for now.

He took from his pocket and unfolded a copy of a partly addressed envelope and a partly completed note and set them on the table in front of me.

M: Go ahead, pick it up. The original's downtown.

The envelope was addressed to Victor J. Pontz, Apt. 301, etc., and read: "Dear Vic, I don't think we'd better see each other any more. I'm tired of put-downs and being made to feel second-rate—"

V: My God, I see why you think— But this is wild. I didn't know the woman. Another guy's been pretending to be me.

S: Who?

V: How should I know?

S: The address is right. You're in the phonebook?

V: Yes, but nobody named Kahler ever called me.

M: According to you.

V: She did write this?

S: The handwriting matches a grocery list and the entries in her appointment calendar in her apartment.

V: Who in God's name is trying to frame me? (Stares frantically at the note) Oh.

M: Notice something?

V: I remember who bought my father's gun.

M: And who would that be?

V: A man named Carlyle Sanford. He bought quite a few of my father's things. The gun was among them.

M: And would he be the type who'd have an affair with the Kahler woman?

V: He might. If you left it to his wife, she'd be convinced he was. I've never been certain that he lived up to her convictions.

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S: Maybe we should talk to him.

M: Would he try to pass himself off as you?

V: I shouldn't have thought so. We're old friends. Wait, you found the gun, right? Does that make sense? Would I have left it? Or would Carlyle leave it, realizing I knew he owned it?

M: People do funny things under stress. It doesn't make sense, but many killers do dumb things.

V: Suppose another person had access to the gun. Suppose another woman wrote the envelope and part of a note. Suppose the Kahler woman didn't write any of this.

S: But the handwriting matches her grocery list and the appointment calendar.

V: Both of which could have been planted by another person—who is my candidate for the murderer.

M: And you could be blowing smoke, too.

V: Wait a minute. Let me show you what I have. (Leaves and returns a few seconds later) From my files in the kitchen.

M: A recipe card?

V: Compare the handwriting with that on the note. Look at that slant and the way those "i"s are dotted.

M: Hmm. You might have something. Here Dave, take a look.

S: There is a similarity.

M: All right, Pontz. Who wrote that recipe?

V: Geraldine Sanford. Carlyle's wife. She's jealous as a cat of him. And she thinks—wrongly—that I'm his corrupting influence.

M: So you're implying that she took his gun, wiped out the competition, and set you up for the fall?

V: I didn't mention that she and I had a heavy thing going years ago. She was too possessive and I broke it off. She married Carlyle on the rebound. Never forgave me.

S: All the same, her wiping out all of the Kahler woman's handwriting and substituting her own? Seems far-fetched.

V: Did you look at any cancelled checks?

M: No.

V: Even if she destroyed them, the bank might still have some. It's the middle of the month.

S: Shall I look into that, Sergeant?

M: Yeah. (Lifts recipe) I'd like to make a copy of this. Write him a receipt, Dave.

V: You think I've given you a lead? I'm not your dead-certain culprit?

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M: Two other leads, Mr. Pontz. But you're not off the hook yet. Don't leave town.

The two policemen got up and moved toward the door.

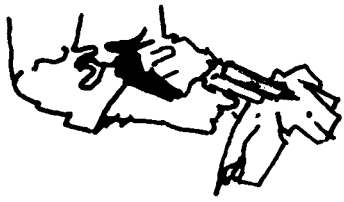
S: We'll be in touch, Pontz. See you later.

I sat there, staring.

Before I could move, I wondered, Is there going to be a knock at the door?

This isn't logical. Wake up.

When I do, I must see at once if Gerry's recipe card is in the file in the kitchen. If there is such a card.



DETECTIVERSE

THE EYES HAD IT

by J. A. CHEESMAN

A smoking pistol in Jill's hand,
Two corpses on the bed—
Joe never seemed to understand
What Jill had often said:
"Don't fool around with Kate next door—
She's got her eyes on you."
But now those eyes were closed tight shut,
And so were Joseph's, too.

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a ***NEW*** short story by

STRINGFELLOW FORBES

There was always an accident to her clothing—a sleeve in the coffee cup, a buttered roll in her lap, gaping runs in her stockings, stamp-pad ink on her elbow, and once a whole bottle of white correcting fluid down the side of her slacks—and she would have to go home early. She never undid the damage, and her wrecked wardrobe was thrown into a corner of the closet. She had very soon stopped going out because she didn't have anything left to wear. At the office they said it was fine with them if she took some time off . . .

ONE OF LEN'S BRIDGES

by STRINGFELLOW FORBES

Something in the distance, that was how it seemed at first, when it began. Like flashes not quite seen. Len was sitting across from her, pushing a coffee mug back and forth, lifting it to drink, then sliding it again through a three-inch track on the table—right, left. He had been quiet so far this morning, but now he took a breath and she knew he would start again. And there, just behind the line of her sight, was a visual clap—large flat planes fell, turning, tumbling, rhythmic in showing their shards of light, winking out, flipping on. Because it puzzled her so, she didn't hear Len speaking.

But he would be saying the same things he had said for the past two weeks, the things she could neither agree with nor answer. He'd start with "I didn't do anything" and work through "They can't prove it" to "Everybody does the same thing, every goddamn contractor in town does it and they've just decided to pick on me." She hoped he wouldn't cry this time. It was only eight o'clock in the morning,

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he had to meet his lawyers. And Jenny had stayed home again from school, she didn't want Jenny to see that.

So she stood up, she rattled her mug onto her plate.

"Can't you say something?" he almost screamed at her. In the beginning, she had tried sympathy, but he had said he didn't need sorry, he needed smarts and nerve. Since then, she hadn't tried to answer him. Now she felt her ribs pull together and she kept her back to him, lest he make her say the words that were ready in her mind. Len, I don't know where to put my feet, the ground doesn't seem to connect any more, there are just little broken balancing places here and there, we've lost our base of who we are. All this that has happened means that you were false and wasn't everything else false, too? Give me time, I'll start over, but that comes later. Now I just have to be quiet for a while. She turned on the water and opened the dishwasher.

"Lib, my God, you'll break that thing yet, the way you slam it. And how many plates have we got left by now? I take the garbage out, you know—I hear broken dishes and glasses in that bag every day."

He's right, she thought, I break things. Turning off the water, she faced him, swiping her hands across her front, where there were stains and smears she'd made on her jeans and her shirt from many such wipings.

On the day it happened, they had had dinner at the club with Don and Janet Rae and she had dropped chocolate syrup on the front of her green-silk dress. John Edwards was the first one to mention the beginning of it all, stopping by their table, rubbing her on the shoulder like he always did as he leaned into their company, saying, "I saw that birdie yesterday, nice shot," and, "Marge went off to see about her mother, so I'm batching it tonight" (squeeze on her shoulder), and, "Tough about that accident, Len—not your fault, of course."

It had been in the paper that night, but she hadn't known there was a connection to Len's company. A bridge, a pretty little arch of a park bridge, surely one of the smallest jobs Len had ever done, had collapsed and the two cars on it had slid into the river. A two-year-old girl was drowned.

The spoon must have tilted when John said that to Len, and she watched the dark drop fall streaming onto the pleats beside the rhinestone buttons of her dress. Janet Rae looked at her quickly and tipped water from a glass onto her napkin, moving to help wipe it.

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But Lib held her away with her forearm and daintily, attentively, rubbed and stroked with her fingers until she had a large gooey spot on the green fabric.

John was leaving, hawing over his shoulder and walking away. She could feel Janet Rae looking at her as she dabbed her smeared fingers on the surface of the water in her glass, blotted each one in the huge white napkin, touched Len's sleeve, and whispered that she had to go home, she'd ruined her dress.

That dress was balled up in her closet at the bottom of a pile of similarly dirtied clothes. She had kept on working and going to meetings and social affairs. But, as on that first night, there was always an accident to her clothing—a sleeve in the coffee cup, a buttered roll in her lap, gaping runs in her stockings, stamp-pad ink on her elbow, and once a whole bottle of white correcting fluid down the side of her slacks—and she would have to go home early. She never undid the damage, and her wrecked wardrobe was thrown into a corner of the closet. She had very soon stopped going out because she didn't have anything left to wear. At the office they said it was fine with them if she took some time off.

Since that first day, the story had been front-page news. Len was accused of ignoring specifications and standards, of adulterating concrete and substituting cheaper metal in the reinforcing framework of his buildings and bridges. Every job he had ever done was being questioned and inspected; deteriorating public housing and public buildings were shown in photographs in the paper; records had been impounded and witnesses sought.

Now, here in the kitchen, early in the morning, Len was angry and that was good. Now when he said, "I tried, I worked hard for my family," he would not be maudlin as she had feared—he would steam himself up. And by the time he got to "Look at this house, you don't think everybody lives in a house like this, do you?" he would be wound up for the day of planning courtroom strategy and crossing public sidewalks confidently.

"Go get dressed. It's late." Elizabeth—Lib was what she called her country-club name, it was a recent habit of Len's to call her that—could hardly hear her own voice. Squares and splinters of light clashed together—distant, beautiful. There was singing quiet inside her head.

"Mom, did you wash yet?"

"Jenny, when I'm working you wash your own clothes. Don't expect me to do it just because I'm off for a few days." The reply was

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automatic. She looked up just in time to see Jenny go back into the hall, her head wrapped in a towel. "Don't you want breakfast?"

Jenny had been in bed for three days with cramps in her stomach, unexplained by any normal physical cycle or any evidence of stomach flu. Her mother had given in easily to pleas that she be allowed to stay at home. Elizabeth hadn't asked her about it, but she didn't imagine that high-school students would fail to mention a sensational graft case to the daughter of the accused man. How would they view it, she wondered—with embarrassment, with criticism? Cynicism seemed most likely to Elizabeth.

"No. I can't eat," Jenny said.

"Are you getting dressed today?"

"Someone's picking me up." Jenny's voice was faint, sifting down the stairwell.

"Won't you be late?"

No answer. The quiet thickened. She handled the dishes with slow deliberation, one at a time, avoiding clatter. This had used to seem to her an intricate dance she knew how to do, the motions of housekeeping and neatness making a satisfying accompaniment to the ramblings of her mind. She knew the number of minutes required to clear up after breakfast, make the bed with every layer of covers straight and taut, apply makeup, drive to the office, all the while planning the order of her work. She wondered now that she had ever bothered to be neat.

Len was behind her—she hadn't heard him come in. "Elizabeth," he said, and she stilled her hands in the sink. He seldom called her by that name from their youth. His voice was low, he sounded tired. "It's Friday—let's go up to the cottage, get away from here." Hands on her hips, he leaned closer and kissed her neck. She didn't turn to him—lights were spinning in the quiet of her head, racketing without sound.

"We can't leave the children," she said.

"They'll be all right for two days. Ask Minna to spend the night." Minna cleaned for them and liked the extra money from staying over when they were away. "Pick me up at the office. Four o'clock."

She listened to the far-off clang of light and thought how strange it was, this driving brilliance, dancing closer with its faint sounds. By the time she thought again of Len, he had gone.

Jenny left while Elizabeth was in the bedroom. The slam of the closing door made her go to the window. There was an unfamiliar rusted car quivering and choking in the semicircular driveway.

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Jenny came out, wearing jeans shredded at the bottoms and a sweatshirt slashed and drooping. She hadn't only mutilated her clothes, she had cut her hair off in swatches and dyed it red down the center of her scalp. How had she done that, Elizabeth wondered, with Mercurochrome? And who was that bearded young man in the car?

Jenny hadn't been out of touch just because she had been home from school. She had a hidey-hole under the eaves in her room and she had begged, before her fifteenth birthday, for her own phone, which she had then strung into the hole. Len had given her a scrap of carpet from one of his jobs and she had lined the hole with it. "I love my phone," she had written on the wall beside the crawl-in door. It had been meant as a thank you, but Len had had a fit about it and made her paint it out. Then when the ballpoint writing kept showing through, he had grounded her for a month—which she hadn't seemed to mind because she had the phone and she spent hours in the hole talking to her friends.

This one with the beard was not any friend Elizabeth had ever seen before—Jenny's friends weren't old enough to have beards. She leaned toward the window, but knew she couldn't open it in time to call to Jenny and stop her from entering the old car, from going fast down the lane to the highway, hidden by blue exhaust.

The sound of that exhaust was almost the last sound Elizabeth heard all day. She loaded clothes into the washing machine and forgot to turn it on. Driving to the shopping center, she wondered at the muffled silence of her car, the hush of the stores, the drifting lack of speech with which she bought groceries in one store and two pairs of underpants in another. Whenever she saw someone she knew or someone who might speak to her, her eyes skimmed away and in silence she passed on. She drove ten blocks out of her way to buy gas at a station where she was not known, paying cash so she wouldn't have to expose her name on the credit card. When she returned at lunchtime, the kitchen was filled with sunlit emptiness. Len's kitchen, really, with the green-marble counters and dark Edwardian cabinets he had insisted on and which he showed off at every party they gave.

She hadn't wanted such an elaborate house, but Len had felt that, as a contractor, he should build a showplace and live in it. And so there was pink brick, there were two-story mullioned windows, a greenhouse, a winding staircase in a stone-floored hall, a living room with one mirrored wall and a paneled fireplace. It was the kind of house, Elizabeth knew, that would someday be prized—by about its

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fifth or sixth owners—as a wonderful example of the imaginative expression of affluence in the Eighties. But finding such a folly and adopting it with an amused air was not the same as building it yourself and having the whole town know the reason for it. Elizabeth always used the back door.

She put the food bags on the nearest clear space—clutter seemed to have grown out from the corners recently—and moved upstairs through the quietness to pack her bag for the trip up north. She couldn't find any clean clothes, but she put in her bathrobe, the new underpants, and some toilet things. When Chuck came home from school, she was still in the bedroom, sitting on the lumpy covers, watching the digital clock and waiting for time to pick Len up in town.

"Mom," Chuck said and he took her hand like a doctor, holding her palm in his and weighing it, as if in that way he could somehow judge her state of mind. He was two years younger than Jenny and he liked to put on a manly, attentive air with his mother, though he was beginning to try to break himself of the habit because he thought he was too old to care so much about her—just as he was beginning to try to dress sloppily, though he had always been neat as a little boy. "Mom, where's Jenny? She didn't come to school and she's not in her room. She's not even in the hole with the phone. —Mo-om?"

Elizabeth couldn't hear him. She smiled because she was at the center of a rush and retreat of curved air, of slicing, slashing arcs of color that shivered toward and past her from deep-blue silence. Chuck left her and went to his own room. His duty as a fledgling teenager seemed to him to be to listen to every rock station he could get on the radio and he played a serious though never particularly happy game of dials, fat earphones with little antennas on his ears.

When Elizabeth saw the lighted numbers on the clock flash to 3:40, she picked up the suitcase—it was so empty her hand hoisted it too high in the air—and started down the stairs. Chuck saw her and came into the hall.

"Are you going somewhere?"

Elizabeth went on, one foot after the other on the stairs.

"Mom, are you going somewhere? Where's Jenny? Mom, is Minna coming? Mom!" He was too old to cry, but not far from it. Elizabeth walked on in her orb of silence, in the wonder of the flashing lights.

On the highway, she drove. Len lay back with his head on the headrest. Elizabeth began to notice bridges, the overpasses that

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crossed the freeway. The steel beams were painted, in this state, with varying colors—rose, heavenly blue, spruce green.

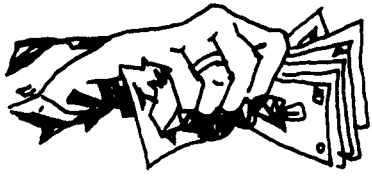
"Aren't they beautiful," she said out of her silence, out of the flaring lights that struck at her, wheeling ever closer.

"What's beautiful?" he said.

"The bridges, with those colors. Are they yours?"

"Yeah. Well, I don't know. Maybe."

Sound came bursting then. Of the car motor—loud—of the rolling whack of tires, of air pushed aside. Of screeches, crashing scream of metal, smash of glass. The violence of light became violent sound and she drove hard to meet it, knowing finally its summons, its prophecy, rocketing to the point of contact between now and future, which was at the concrete base of one of Len's bridges.



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a *NEW* Captain Leopold story by

EDWARD D. HOCH

"Everything seems conservative in this case," Leopold told Max Hafner, "including the staid old St. George Hotel. Is that where Mrs. Buckman and the blackmailer agreed to meet?"

Hafner nodded. "They agreed to meet in the lobby. Somehow he must have lured her up to a room."

"Room 1010," said Leopold . . .

THE MURDER IN ROOM 1010

by EDWARD D. HOCH

Captain Leopold had barely known Max Hafner during the younger man's years on the Police Force. Hafner had been assigned to Narcotics and Vice, in the days when those specialties rarely overlapped the homicides and violent crimes that were Leopold's concern. All this had changed in the present decade, but Max Hafner was gone from the Force, earning a comfortable living running a security firm that doubled as a private-detective agency.

"Sure, I know Max," Sergeant Connie Trent said, responding to Leopold's question on a chilly November morning. "I used to work with him on Narcotics. That was a long time ago, though. He's been off the Force nearly ten years."

"He called me at home last night," Leopold said. "Wants to have lunch with me today, like we were old friends."

"Maybe he's going to offer you a job."

Leopold chuckled. "The thought crossed my mind." His wife Molly had suggested the same thing after the phone call. Of course, Leopold would never leave the Force, and who would want him at his age? Still, he sometimes envied men like Hafner, who'd had the vision to strike off on their own while they were still young.

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"Hold out for fifty thousand," Connie advised, only half in jest. "Max Hafner can afford it."

The lunch itself proved to be a pleasant affair at an expensive French restaurant across the street from City Hall. Leopold had eaten there only a few times in the past, always when someone else was picking up the check. Seated across the table from Max Hafner, he tried to remember what this portly, middle-aged business man had looked like in a police uniform but the image wouldn't come. During lunch, they spoke casually of some mutual friends on the Force.

"Is Connie Trent still with you?" Hafner asked. "She was a great little girl."

"She still is. She's a sergeant now, and one of our best."

"Fletcher, too? I think he made lieutenant just before I resigned."

Leopold nodded. "Still there."

"You know, I hired a few of the boys when they left the department. I like to think of Hafner Security as a second Police Force at times."

Leopold finished his dessert. "I have to be getting back soon. If there was anything special you wanted to bring up—"

"Of course—I keep forgetting your time's not your own when you work for the city. I'll get to the point. You're aware that we handle a little private-detective work along with the security that constitutes the bulk of our business?"

"Yes," Leopold admitted cautiously. Here it comes, he thought. A job offer.

"Right now we have some need for a good battery-operated tape recorder small enough to fit into a woman's purse. A voice-activated one would be best. Could you recommend a good brand?"

"What?"

"A tape recorder. I asked—"

"I heard you. The question just took me by surprise. Was that all you wanted to ask me?"

"That's all I can think of at the moment."

Leopold mentioned a brand name the department used, and after Max Hafner paid the check they parted with a handshake.

When he returned to the office, Connie was waiting for him. "Well? Did you take the job?" she asked with a grin.

"He didn't offer me one. He wanted to know a good brand of tape recorder. He spent nearly fifty dollars on lunch to ask me about tape

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recorders. And then he didn't seem all that interested in what I told him."

"Do you think he had some other reason for inviting you?"

"It beats me," Leopold admitted. "Maybe once he saw me again, he decided I was too old for the job he had in mind."

Molly called later in the afternoon, curious about his luncheon. He told her the same thing he'd told Connie. "It was strange. I could have understood it better if he'd been a close friend on the Force, but we hardly knew each other. I think he changed his mind about what he originally wanted to say to me."

"You sound almost disappointed. Would you have accepted a job if he offered one?"

"Of course not," Leopold said. "But I wouldn't have minded the pleasure of turning him down."

Two days later, Leopold had virtually forgotten about the luncheon. It was midafternoon of a busy day when the call came in from the St. George, one of the city's largest hotels. Connie took it and hurried into Leopold's office. "There's a dead man in one of the rooms at the St. George, Captain. Looks like a homicide."

"Is Fletcher in?"

Connie shook her head. "Still out on that bank robbery."

"I'd better go with you, then. Old Duncan Kincaid will fire off a letter to the newspaper if I don't cover this."

The St. George occupied an entire block facing Veterans Park in the center of the city. At one time it had been part of a nationwide hotel chain, but a few years back Kincaid, a local developer, had bought it with the help of an investment syndicate. Though Leopold was no great admirer of Kincaid, he had to admit the hotel had been kept up in style. The dark wood paneling gave the lobby a warm, rich look and the ebony statue of St. George slaying the traditional dragon made a nice centerpiece.

An ambulance and a squad car were already at the hotel when Leopold and Connie arrived. The first officer on the scene led them to the elevator and then to the tenth floor. "The front desk had reports of a woman screaming," the officer explained. "A security man went up to Room 1010 and tried to open the door. The chain lock was on, so he had to cut it. Inside, he found the screaming woman, barely conscious, next to the body of a murdered man."

They found another officer in the hotel room with ambulance

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attendants who were attempting to calm a pretty, dark-haired woman.

"See if you can talk to her, Connie," Leopold directed, turning his attention to the body on the king-sized bed around the corner from the door. The man was fully clothed and the spread was still in place, its pale-pink design saturated with a wide circle of blood. The dead man, who seemed about the same age as the woman, had been stabbed several times in the chest and stomach. The bloody knife lay on the carpeted floor near the woman's chair.

Connie finally managed to calm the woman and she was strapped to a stretcher for the trip to the hospital. "She doesn't seem to be wounded," Connie told Leopold as the stretcher was wheeled out. "Just hysterical and maybe a little high on something. I couldn't be sure."

"Did she kill him?"

"She claims not. Says she doesn't know how it happened. She dozed off and woke up to find him like that."

"Dozed off in the middle of the afternoon?"

A large black man in a three-piece suit entered the room. He was still carrying a pair of long-handled heavy-duty cutters. "Are you the security man?" Leopold asked, introducing himself.

"Right. Sam Mason's the name."

"Tell me what happened."

"We had a report of a woman screaming in this room. I could still hear her when I got up here. When she wouldn't open up, I used the passkey on the door. I saw the chain was on, so I had to get these cutters."

"The dead man was on the bed like he is now?"

"Just like that. I didn't touch him. I tried to calm her down and then I told the manager to phone the police."

"What did she say?"

"She kept insisting she didn't kill him. Hell, if she didn't do it, she locked the door after the killer left."

Connie reached behind one of the chairs. "Here's her purse, Captain."

Leopold opened it. "I don't suppose there's anything—" He stopped in mid-sentence. The purse contained a small, voice-activated tape recorder. It was the same model he'd recommended to Max Hafner.

A few hours later, Hafner sat across the desk from Leopold at Headquarters. "The old place hasn't changed much," he remarked.

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"I'm glad to see you finally got rid of that coin-operated coffee machine, though. It never worked right."

It was too late in the day for small talk and Leopold came right to the point. "Max, do you know a woman named Anita Buckman?"

"Anita— It does sound familiar."

"Think hard, it's important," Leopold said grimly.

"Well, yeah—I have a client by that name."

"You'd better tell me about her."

"What's this all about?"

"Murder, Max. Your client was found alone with a dead man in a locked hotel room this afternoon."

"Has the victim been identified?"

"A man named Ken Armstrong. He used to teach at one of the local high schools until he was accused of molesting a female student. Since then his life's been all downhill. He was arrested last year for living off the earnings of a prostitute, but the charge was dismissed."

Max Hafner moistened his lips with his tongue. "I'd better tell you about it."

Leopold nodded encouragingly.

"Her husband was being blackmailed and she came to me for help. He'd had a fling with a prostitute and somebody took pictures. They got some money from her husband but then they came after her—told her her husband could lose his job at one of our town's more staid banking institutions. She wasn't about to pay more blackmail, but she didn't want the publicity of calling in the police, either, so she came to me. I figured our best bet was to have her record the payoff meeting and then force the blackmailers to lay off under threat of arrest. That's why I asked you about tape recorders the other day."

"This Armstrong was the blackmailer?"

"I assume so. A man contacted the husband and then phoned Anita Buckman."

"What's the husband's name?"

"Rudolph Buckman. Rudy Buckman. He's a vice-president in the trust department at Community Trust Company. Conservative, like I said."

"Everything seems conservative in this case, including the staid old St. George Hotel. Is that where Mrs. Buckman and the blackmailer agreed to meet?"

Hafner nodded. "They agreed to meet in the lobby. Somehow he must have lured her up to a room."

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"Room 1010." Leopold decided it was time to get a bit tougher with Hafner. "Look here, Max, do you expect me to believe you took me to lunch the other day just to find out what model of tape recorder I'd recommend? You've probably been using them for years. Chances are you know more about them than I do."

Hafner looked uncomfortable, running a hand across his broad stomach. "I'll be frank. My first intention was to tell you about this case and to ask a favor. I wanted someone in that hotel lobby backing up Mrs. Buckman in case the blackmailer turned violent. I'm too well known around town to do it myself and you can see I'm not in the best shape for any rough stuff."

Leopold shrugged, shifting to a friendlier tone of voice. "So tell me what changed your mind at lunch."

"I suppose I realized I couldn't expect you to furnish a plainclothes officer as a backup without filing a formal complaint, and that was what Anita Buckman wanted to avoid. While we were eating, I happened to see Sam Mason pass the window and I remembered he was head of security at the St. George. I decided to use him instead, and avoid bringing my own people in on the investigation. Then I simply made up that question about the tape recorder."

"At least you followed my advice," Leopold told him, taking the miniature recorder from his desk drawer. "Care to listen to this?"

"Of course. It should tell us what happened in that room. I'm sure Mrs. Buckman acted in self-defense."

"She denies all knowledge of the killing—says she blacked out for a few minutes and woke to find him stabbed to death on the bed." Leopold pressed the Play button and leaned back to listen to the tape for the third time.

It started with some lobby sounds, half heard voices loud enough to activate the recorder. Then a woman's voice, quite close, asked, "You're the one who phoned me?"

A man's voice responded. "That's right. Did you bring the money?"

"In my purse. Where are the pictures of my husband?"

"Upstairs. I had to make sure you came alone."

"I'm alone."

"Come up with me. It'll only take a minute."

"All right."

There were more random noises and the chime of an elevator bell, then: "Here we are."

"You don't have to lock the door."

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"We don't want anyone interrupting us, do we? Let's see the money."

"What about the pictures?"

"Right here."

"God, you're an animal!"

"It's your husband, lady."

"Who's this woman?"

"I guess you could call her a mutual friend of your husband's and mine. Her name's Rhoda."

"And you took these pictures?"

"I admit it. —Rudy's bank wouldn't like these, would they?"

"You scum!"

"Relax. I've got a bottle of rye here. How about a drink?"

"No."

"I'll pour you a weak one, anyway, in case."

"Is this how you make your living?"

"I do lots of things. I used to teach high school."

"I'll bet."

"No, really. Here, take a swallow and then you can give me the money."

"This tastes terrible! What's in it?"

"Let's have the money."

"No! —I feel strange! The room's starting to spin!"

"That's your imagination."

"What did—?"

A jumble of sounds, and then Armstrong's voice came on again. "What in hell are you doing?" A gasp, then the rest of the tape was filled with Anita's screams until it ran out and Leopold switched off the recorder.

Max Hafner stared at him. "You say the room was locked from the inside?"

"Yes. And the chain lock was on."

"From the tape, it sounds like she killed him. But she might have been drugged at the time. Did you check the bottle of whiskey?"

"It's being analyzed now."

Hafner shook his head sadly. "Why would she kill him when she had the evidence against him on this tape? He wasn't a threat to her or her husband any longer."

"You said you decided to use Sam Mason to keep an eye on her. Have you talked to him?"

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"No. I hadn't heard a thing about this when you called me in here."

"Weren't you curious?"

"I have a busy office, Captain, and a small staff."

"All right, Max. I'll call you if I need anything else."

"Do you think Anita Buckman killed him, Captain?"

"I try to keep an open mind at this stage of the investigation."

"Is there any other possibility?"

"At least one," Leopold told him.

At the hospital, Leopold encountered Rudy Buckman for the first time. He was a pale, blond-haired man in his thirties who looked as if he'd spent too much time inside his bank.

"Is it really necessary to have a policewoman on guard outside my wife's room?" he asked after Leopold introduced himself.

"I'm afraid it is, Mr. Buckman. "Your wife is a suspect in a murder case. The only suspect we have at the moment."

"Are you here to question her?"

"I'd like to speak with her if she's able."

"She's calmed down quite a bit. The doctor wants to keep her overnight."

Leopold followed him into his wife's room, nodding to the officer on duty at the door. Anita Buckman was in bed but wide awake. "I'm feeling all right now," she told them. "Why can't I go home?"

"The doctor will release you in the morning," Buckman assured her. "He just wants to be sure you're all right."

Leopold cleared his throat. "I wonder if you're feeling up to making a statement, Mrs. Buckman. I must advise you that you have the right to remain silent or have a lawyer present. Any statement you do make may be used against you."

"I didn't kill him!"

"That's what I'm here to determine."

"Do you want a lawyer, Anita?" her husband asked.

"No! I have nothing to hide."

"Suppose you tell me what happened," Leopold suggested.

"That detective, Hafner—"

"Max Hafner."

"Yes. I went to him about the blackmail."

"I wish you'd told me," Rudy Buckman said. "If I'd known Armstrong was shaking you down, too—"

"You didn't come to me, Rudy. I couldn't go to you." She took a

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sip of water from the paper cup by her bedside. "Hafner said I could turn the tables on the blackmailer by getting a tape recording of the transaction. It seemed like a sensible solution and I agreed to it. The blackmailer—you said his name was Armstrong?"

"Ken Armstrong," Leopold verified.

"He told me the pictures were in his hotel room and we went up to get them. I saw them, Rudy. They were awful. You and that woman—"

"What happened then?" Leopold asked, trying to keep her on track.

"He insisted I have a drink of whiskey. I only had a swallow, but it made me dizzy. I don't remember what happened, except that all of a sudden he was on the bed, bleeding. I think I started to scream then."

"Did Armstrong let anyone else into the room?"

"No. And I remember him locking the door when we entered."

"Could someone have been hiding in the closet or the bathroom?" Rudy asked. "Or under the bed?"

"I—suppose so."

"But they couldn't have gotten out," Leopold was quick to point out. "Sam Mason, the hotel security man, had to cut the chain to enter the room."

"I—"

"Don't say anything more, Anita. I'll get you a lawyer in the morning." Buckman turned to Leopold. "I think that's enough for now, Captain."

"All right. We'll continue this tomorrow at my office."

Leopold left the hospital room and walked to the elevators. Visiting hours were coming to an end, but he had one more stop to make elsewhere.

Sam Mason was off duty by the time Leopold reached the St. George Hotel. "You just missed him," the desk clerk said. "I'll tell you, though, sometimes on rough days he stops for a nightcap at the Fountainhead down the block."

"Was this a rough day?"

The clerk rolled his eyes. "You'd better believe it."

Leopold was on his way out of the hotel when he was stopped by Duncan Kincaid, the grey-haired developer who owned the place. "Captain Leopold!"

"Mr. Kincaid! I didn't know you involved yourself in the day-to-day operations here."

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"I came down because of the killing. It's not good for the business to have a murder in one of the guest rooms. Has the woman confessed yet?"

"She claims she didn't do it."

"But Sam Mason tells me the room was locked from the inside. He had to cut through the chain."

"That's right."

"If she was alone with him she must have stabbed him."

"We're working on it, Mr. Kincaid. We hope to have a break in the case soon."

Leopold found Sam Mason nursing a bourbon at the Fountainhead bar and sat down beside him. The man squinted at him in the dim light. "Leopold, isn't it?"

"That's right. I wanted to ask you a couple of questions about this afternoon. About the murder in Room 1010."

"I told you everything I know."

"What about the dead man, Ken Armstrong? Ever notice him hanging around the lobby?"

"Not before today."

"Do you happen to know a friend of his named Rhoda? A prostitute?"

"Rhoda? There's a fancy call girl by that name. Rhoda Quigley. If I see her in the lobby I escort her out. I haven't seen her lately, though."

"Where does she live?"

"Beats me. You probably got a file on her at Headquarters."

"Do you know Max Hafner?"

"Private dick, isn't he?"

"That's right, that and security. He says he slipped you a few bills to keep an eye on Anita Buckman when she met Armstrong this afternoon."

"Hell, man, I can't do outside work! Mr. Kincaid would have my ass for it."

"I'm not asking about the rules. I'm asking if Hafner had you watch her."

"Well, yeah, I guess he mentioned it."

"Didn't do a very good job, did you?"

"I followed them up to the room, but there was nothing more I could do after they went inside. I went downstairs to call Hafner, and then I got the report of the screaming."

"Was Hafner at his office?"

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"No. He was out."

"Then what did you do?"

Mason swallowed the rest of his bourbon and said, "When I heard about the screaming I went back up there. The chambermaid gave me the passkey and I unlocked the door, then I had to go get the cutters and cut the chain. When we went in, Mrs. Buckman was still screaming and this Armstrong guy was dead on the bed."

"The chambermaid was with you? She saw you cut the chain?"

"She sure did."

Leopold tried not to show his disappointment. He had had the idea that Sam Mason might have cut the chain after stabbing Armstrong. But with the chambermaid as a witness that possibility faded away.

Back at his office, Leopold phoned home to tell Molly he'd be late, then he settled down to review the relevant objects that had been found in the room—the knife, the bottle of whiskey, a camera, Anita Buckman's purse, and the tape recorder. In addition to the recorder, the purse had contained an envelope full of cut-up newspaper, apparently a half hearted attempt to fool the blackmailer at payoff time, if it came to that. Once she had the transaction on tape, Anita would have had to get out of that room fast. As it turned out, she hadn't been fast enough.

Leopold turned his attention to the 35-mm camera. It had been found on the closet shelf and apparently belonged to Armstrong. There was a full roll of film in it, with no shots exposed. "What do you make of this?" he asked Connie when she came in with the lab report.

"My guess is that he was going to try for some photos of Mrs. Buckman, too. The whiskey was loaded with knockout drops. More than that one swallow and she'd still be sleeping. You've got to say Armstrong had nerve, Captain. He gets Buckman's wife up there to pay blackmail for her husband and knocks her out with the idea of taking off her clothes and getting some shots of her for future blackmail."

"That's speculation."

"What else makes sense? Why else would he try drugging her?"

Leopold thought about it. "Maybe you're right."

"She must have had the knife in her purse and she used it when she felt herself going under."

"Then why deny it? No jury would convict her for stabbing him under those circumstances."

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"I don't know," Connie admitted. "Maybe she's afraid."

"Let's see those photos of the crime scene," Leopold said. He shuffled through them, passing quickly over those of the body and concentrating on the others. There was one of the door, showing the chain cut neatly in half with five links hanging from either side. The broken pieces of the split link had fallen to the carpet.

"Here's something else to check on, Connie. Armstrong's partner in the shakedown may have been a call girl named Rhoda Quigley. See if there's an arrest record on her and pick her up for questioning."

It was when he thought about Rhoda Quigley that he suddenly realized how stupid he'd been.

Molly was waiting for him when he reached home a little before nine. "I'll heat something up for you," she suggested.

He kissed her lightly on the lips. "Just make me a sandwich. I may have to go out again."

"What now?"

"I'm waiting for a call from Connie. It's that murder at the St. George."

"I thought they found the woman in the room."

He gave her a tired smile. "That would be too easy." He took off his coat and then went back to examine the lock on their front door. "Nine," he said more to himself than to Molly.

"What's that?"

"Nothing. Just bringing my work home from the office."

The ringing of the telephone interrupted them. "I'll get it," Leopold said. "It's probably Connie."

"Not already! You haven't eaten yet."

"Captain," Connie said, "I've got Rhoda Quigley here at Headquarters. She wasn't hard to find."

"I'll be right down, Connie."

Molly handed him a ham sandwich on his way out the door.

Rhoda Quigley was a well dressed young woman with brown hair and a winning smile. She didn't look like a call girl, and Leopold couldn't imagine her working the streets as a prostitute. She might have been selling real estate or working in an insurance office. "Am I under arrest?" she asked him with a sly smile.

"That depends on you. Do you know a man named Ken Armstrong?"

"I knew him. The TV news says he was killed this afternoon."

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"That's correct. What about a man named Rudy Buckman?"

The smile began to fade. "Just what is it you want to know?"

"The penalty for blackmail in this state—"

"I wasn't involved in any blackmail. What Ken did with those pictures was his own affair."

"But you knew he was taking them."

"Yes," she admitted softly.

"You've done this with other clients?"

"I figured it wasn't harming anyone. Ken just liked to look at pictures. Some people get their kicks that way."

"What did he do—hide in the closet?"

She hesitated. "Can I smoke in here?"

"Go ahead."

She lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "No, he didn't hide in the closet. He was afraid the guy would hang up his coat or something. I'd keep the John busy while Ken sneaked in. It wasn't difficult. You couldn't see the door from the bed."

"Wasn't it locked?"

"He'd tricked it up somehow. We always used the same room."

"Which one was that?"

"Room 1010 at the St. George Hotel."

"I see." Leopold studied her. "I'd suggest you get a lawyer in here before we take your formal statement."

He went out to find Connie. "I want you to find a judge to issue a search warrant," he told her.

"Tonight?"

"Right now."

"It's a holiday, you know. Some of the judges might have taken a long weekend."

"Holiday? Oh, Veterans Day—I forgot about that. Try Judge Newman. He'll be in town."

"All right. Give me the name and address for the warrant."

Leopold wrote it out for her. He paused momentarily over the address, but finally printed it out decisively.

"You see, Connie," he explained an hour later as they drove to their destination, "it should have been obvious to us from the beginning that Anita Buckman didn't kill Armstrong. Someone else *had* to be in that hotel room."

"How can you be so sure?"

"Because something very important was missing from that room.

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Armstrong brought Anita Buckman up there to show her the photographs of her husband with Rhoda. We know from the tape recording that he did show her the photos. But what happened to them? They weren't among the things we found in the room. The only possibility is that someone entered the room and removed them."

"It might have been Sam Mason, after he cut the chain."

"Why? To deliver them to Hafner? That wouldn't make sense. The pictures were proof that Anita was being blackmailed, and she was Hafner's client. Besides, the chambermaid was with Mason when he broke in. No, the pictures were removed by the killer, and that means it wasn't Anita."

"Who, then? And how did they get into the room?"

He turned the car into the street they were seeking. "Someone to whom the pictures were all-important. Not another blackmailer, and certainly not Rhoda Quigley. She'd done this sort of thing before. Armstrong must have had numerous prints of her in the arms of clients. As for the *how* of it, my own observations were confirmed by my interview with Rhoda Quigley. Obtaining a passkey for the room was never a problem. The killer might have had one from a prior visit, or tricked the chambermaid into borrowing hers just long enough to make an impression of it in putty. The problem was the chain lock.

"I noticed in the police photograph that Mason had cut the middle link, leaving five links on each side. That meant the chain had eleven links in all. Of course these vary by manufacturer, but I did notice that my chain lock at home has only nine links. It seemed the chain on the door of Room 1010 was a bit longer than normal. Then Rhoda told me Armstrong always used that same room for his photo sessions. He'd gimmicked the door so he could sneak into the room with his camera while Rhoda and the potential blackmail victim were making love. He'd simply substituted a different chain, one long enough so he could reach his hand in to unlatch it—and to relatch it later. To anyone locking the door from the inside it would have seemed normal."

Connie nodded. "We had a hotel thief last year who used that method. He'd enter an empty room during the day with a passkey, substitute a slightly longer chain, and then return at night when the occupants of the room were sleeping and there were wallets lying around."

Leopold stopped the car in front of the address he had written

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down an hour earlier. "The killer had to know about this system, or at least be able to figure it out from his own experience. And he had to be intimately concerned with those photographs. Rudy Buckman is the only one who fills the bill."

Buckman opened the door when they rang. "It's a bit late for a call, isn't it, Captain? I was about to go to bed."

"We have a search warrant here, Mr. Buckman."

"For what?" he asked, immediately on the defensive.

"The pictures you removed from the hotel room today after you killed Armstrong."

"That's crazy!" Buckman stepped aside as they entered the house and Connie moved on to the living room.

"You knew there was a way past that lock," Leopold said. "When you heard him drug your wife, you burst in and stabbed him. Then you must have decided you wouldn't mind if she went to prison for the murder. You took the pictures—a big mistake—and relocked the door. You didn't take them to work because the bank was closed for the holiday. I doubt if you'd have risked throwing them into a trash can. You brought them back here, didn't you?"

"Captain," Connie called, "there are a few ashes in the fireplace—and the unburnt corner of a photograph."

"Call the lab boys. They'll get an image off those larger pieces of ash." He turned back to Rudy Buckman and read him his rights as he took out a pair of handcuffs.

A week later, Max Hafner invited Leopold to lunch again. "I understand Buckman confessed."

"That's right. It's all over but the trial. He'll try to plead some sort of justification, I suppose, but the jury isn't likely to forget that he was willing to frame his wife."

Hafner toyed with his glass. "You know, Captain, I'm going to make you an offer I should have made long ago. Would you be interested in retiring from the Force and coming to work for me? I could certainly use someone with your brains and knowledge."

Captain Leopold smiled, feeling good. "Thanks, Max, I appreciate that. But I'm not ready to retire yet. And today the lunch is on me."

"Q"

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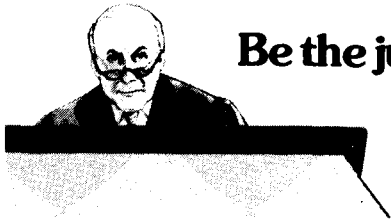

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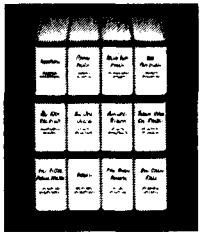

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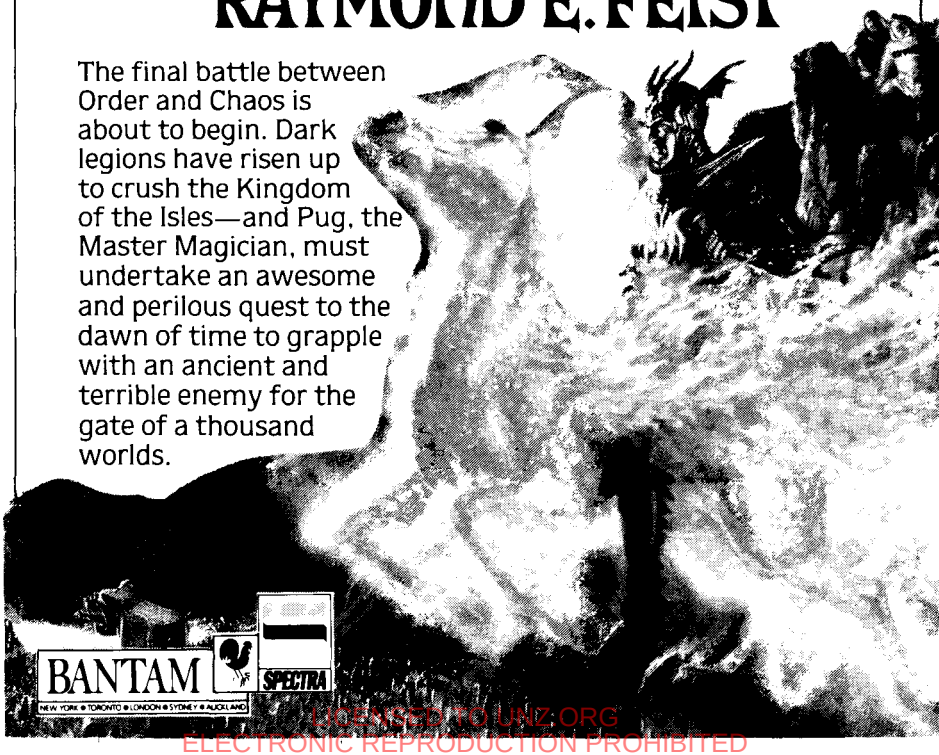

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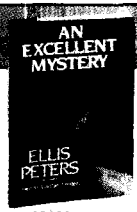

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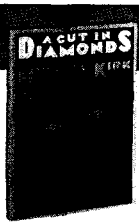

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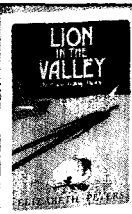

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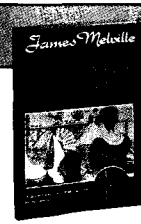

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